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Major safety failures found



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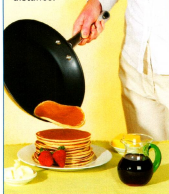
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Eternal vigilance

CHOICE's test report on pool fences (page 8) is bad news for all parents whose children have access to a yard with a pool. The message of constant vigilance is engraved on most parents' hearts already, but you wouldn't be human if you didn't think your kids were reasonably safe as long as they're outside the pool fence.

Unfortunately accident statistics show kids do gain access to pools — from a house that has only three-sided pool fencing (where the fourth side is a wall of the house, even if it has doors and windows in it) or via a propped-open pool gate, for example. But if you've checked the doors, windows and gate are shut and removed any toys or garden furniture that kids could use as a foothold to climb over the fence, you probably feel fairly safe.

Our test results of pool fences show that there can still be another danger. More than half the tubular-metal fences we tested failed a standard test that checks whether the bars are strong and rigid enough to prevent an opening being made between them that a young child could fit through. In particular, 14 out of 16 flat-top fences failed this test (versus four out of 15 loop-top fences, where the bars pass through the top rail to form a loop).

The article explains why the flat-top design might generically be more likely to fail this test, but the bottom line is that no matter what kind of pool fence you or your neighbours, family and friends have, life for parents has just become even more anxious — through no fault of their own or their children's.



Jane Mackenzie,
Editor

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More than half the fences tested failed an Australian Standard safety test.

Photo: Getty Images

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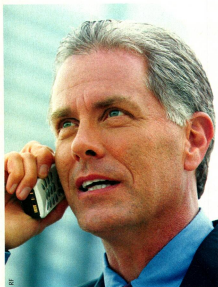
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Mobile phone radiation

Radiation emitted by modern GSM mobile phones is well below the Australian guideline level. And despite scare stories, after a good decade of mobile phone use, no study into potential health effects of handsets has discovered any repeatable identifiable risk (see *Do mobiles kill mice?*, CHOICE, June 2004).

The specific absorption rate (SAR) provided for all new phone models in Australia gives an

indication to what extent body tissue heats up during a phone call. Under current guidelines, the value mustn't exceed 2.0 W per kg of body tissue. This level is considered safe, and in itself contains a safety margin.

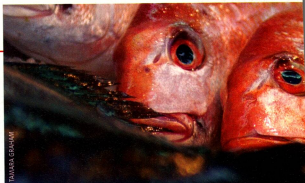
The vast majority of handsets in our last test (CHOICE, June 2004) have a claimed SAR of below half (in many cases well below) the guideline value, and according to the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association can all be considered equally safe.

What's more, the claimed SAR relates to the handset sending at maximum capacity, which it rarely does, as it continuously adapts to the minimum power required to make a call in order to optimise battery life.

A joint test recently carried out by a number of European consumer organisations adds weight to these conclusions. It looked at a range of GSM handsets, measuring SAR values when sending at full capacity, and at a lower level simulating a typical phone call.

None of the phones exceeded 1 W/kg at full capacity, and sending at lower capacity usually reduced the SAR considerably — in some cases to less than 0.2 W/kg.

The measurements were done in the 900 MHz network. Radiation in the 1800 MHz network (both frequencies are used in Australia, and your phone can switch between them without you noticing) is likely to be lower — for some models that were also tested at 1800 MHz, by 60–80%.



Sustainable seafood

With Australian dietary guidelines encouraging us to eat one or two serves of fish a week, the good news is we're eating more of it. The bad news is that fish aren't an inexhaustible resource — while more than 500 species of fish and shellfish are caught or farmed in Australia, some fish stocks are now too low to be sustainable.

Particularly at risk are deep-sea fish and species that grow slowly and take years to reach breeding age. For example, orange roughy — one of the species most imperilled — are thought to live up to 150 years and don't breed until they're 25–30 years old.

Now the Australian Marine Conservation Society is asking us to consider conservation when next choosing our seafood. Interestingly, the list of fish under threat includes some of the same fish to avoid or limit because of high mercury levels — particularly important if you're pregnant or cooking for young children. Orange roughy/sea perch, tuna and shark/flake are all on both lists (see *Choice Cuts*, May 2004).

The society also advises choosing Australian seafood ahead of imported, as there's little information available about how imported species are caught, farmed or where exactly they came from (see www.amcs.org.au for more on this).

With the recent publicity about fish substitution as well (see CHOICE, July 2004), this is all further reason to make sure you find a reputable fishmonger who can tell you exactly what you're buying. And to help you make sure the fish you eat aren't on the endangered list, here's a handy list to cut out and pop in your wallet for your next visit to the fishmarket or fishmonger.

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

A CUPPA TO FIGHT BAD BREATH

A few cups of black or green tea prevent bad breath, reports Germany's *Test* magazine. Researchers presume the polyphenols in tea stop the growth of bacteria in the mouth and reduce the production of foul-smelling enzymes.

BREAST IS BEST

Activists have protested for years against the marketing of infant formula in developing countries. In an effort to encourage breastfeeding, the Indian Government passed a bill last year that prohibits all forms of advertising and promotion of infant milk substitutes, feeding bottles and infant foods, reports India's *Insight* magazine.

OVER THE TOP

From the UK's *Which?* magazine comes the following product warning: "Before starting work, turn off water supply and drain the section of the system you intend to be working on. Isolate any adjacent electricity and gas supplies. Do not disturb any earth bonding connections. Some plumbing work is subject to regulations. If in doubt, contact your local authority. On restoring the water supply, check all joints for signs of leakage." The product? A sink plug.



Say no to	Also called
Bigeye tuna (Indian Ocean)	Tuna
Black teatfish	Bêche-de-mer (sea cucumber), surf redfish
Blue warehou	Snotty trevalla, trevally, sea bream
Brown tiger prawn	Tiger prawn
Eastern gemfish	Hake, king coute, silver kingfish
Orange roughy	Deep sea perch, sea perch
Redfish	Nannygai, red snapper
Sandfish	Bêche-de-mer (sea cucumber)
School shark	Flake, snapper shark, tope
Silver trevally	Silver bream, white trevally
Southern bluefin tuna	Tuna
Southern scallop	Commercial, king or Tassie scallop
Tropical rock lobster	Coral crayfish, painted cray

Can you help?

APPLIANCE REPAIRS

Has your fridge, washing machine or dishwasher broken down in the past 12 months and needed repairing? If so, we'd like to hear from you. We're interested in both the questions listed below and in any other comments you have about the repair experience.

- What brand and model is the appliance and, if you know, how old is it?
- What was the problem, and could it be fixed? If not, why?
- If it could be fixed, was it done in your home on the first visit, or on a later visit? Or did it have to be taken away?
- Was the repairer from the appliance's manufacturer or from an independent repair/service company?
- If you still have a record, how much did the repair cost you (for parts and labour if you have the information)?
- Were you satisfied with the repair and the service you received?

Please email us at repairs@choice.com.au or write to **Appliance repairs, CHOICE**, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, by September 30. Thank you for your help.

Fed up with cold dinners?

Are you sick of receiving uninvited phone calls just when you're trying to eat your dinner or get the kids to bed?

The August/September 2004 issue of our new magazine, *CHOICE Money & Rights*, gives practical tips on how to counter misuse of your private information, including how to deal with 'cold callers'.

A particularly dodgy type of cold call is from so-called investment professionals offering "wonderful tax-free investments that anyone would be a fool to refuse". You might think no-one would fall for it, but Australians have lost an estimated \$400 million to phone investment scams.

Cold calling about financial products or services is illegal if the caller doesn't have an Australian Financial Services Licence (AFSL). If you're offered a financial product over the phone, ask:

- What is the caller's name, address and phone number?
- Do they hold an AFSL? If not, hang up. If they claim to have a licence, check at www.fido.asic.gov.au or call 1300 300 630.
- If the caller is licensed but you don't want to receive further calls, demand to be put on their 'no calls' register.

Calls from market researchers and pollsters can be just as irritating. If you want to stop them in future, ask the caller to remove you from their organisation's call list. Verify the caller's name and contact details and confirm your instructions by mail or email. If they refuse to help, you can contact the Association of Market Research Organisations.



The August/September edition of *CHOICE Money & Rights* also has information on how to deal with junk mail, tenant blacklists, incorrect medical records, online information and junk email. To subscribe, call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.

Keyed in to key costs

Several subscribers have contacted us with a complaint about the high cost of replacement car keys for newer-model cars, so we decided to find out what's going on.

Since 2001 all new cars have been required to be fitted with anti-theft engine immobilisers, which are mostly operated via a transponder chip fitted in the car's key. It's the sophisticated technology embedded in this system — take the key out of the ignition and the engine is immobilised in 30 seconds; the car and key change code every time you use it — that's led to the big increase in replacement key costs.

We asked the major manufacturers and Insurance Australia Group (IAG) what it's likely to cost to replace just one car key for popular models. As the following list shows, there's considerable variation in price.

	Key cost (\$)
Ford Falcon	100.10
Holden Astra	32.45 (with remote, 85.80)
Holden Commodore	53.30
Hyundai Getz	47.30
Mazda 3	53.72
Mitsubishi Magna	66.00
Nissan Xtrail	112.53
Subaru Forester (incl built-in remote)	146.30
Toyota Camry	74.80
Toyota Corolla	74.80
Toyota Echo	74.80
Toyota Landcruiser	78.10
Toyota Prado	78.10
Toyota RAV4	74.80

To these basic costs you generally need to add the cost of a locksmith to cut the key (around \$20–\$25) and the labour costs for programming the new key to the car, which could cost as

much as \$150 an hour.

Some dealers have to send away for keys and it can take up to an hour to program them, so this can easily be a time and money-consuming exercise. However, the manufacturers we contacted estimated the average labour cost to be in the \$30–\$50 range.

Once you total the costs, if you lose a key you're likely to be out of pocket at least \$100 — considerably more if a transmitter key or remote control is required. Readers who had to replace all their keys paid up to \$400.

The good news is that engine immobilisers have dramatically reduced car theft, which is down by around 30% in the three years since they've been compulsory on new cars. But this means car theft of newer cars is increasingly reliant on access to the keys, putting the onus on motorists to keep them safe. In 20% of cases where cars with an immobiliser were stolen, the keys were still in the car; in 50% of cases the thief got access to the key in some other way.

To save yourself money:

- When buying a secondhand car, check that two sets of keys are part of the purchase and ask for a new set or a discount if they're not.
- Be aware of where you put your car keys — don't leave them in the car at petrol stations or put them on the table in restaurants and cafes.
- Shop around. It's up to the dealer to set the price for parts and labour, and they vary a lot from one to another.

New listeria advice

Pregnant women have long been advised to avoid foods that could be contaminated with listeria bacteria, as listeriosis (the illness the bacteria can cause) can harm an unborn baby. Now Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) has updated its advice to include the elderly and people with a compromised immune system, as they also have a higher risk of developing listeriosis.

At-risk people are advised to eat only freshly cooked or freshly prepared foods, particularly when they're eating out. FSANZ suggests they avoid foods from salad bars, deli counters and sandwich bars as they're at greater risk of being contaminated with listeria. And there's a list of individual foods best avoided — go to the FSANZ website at www.foodstandards.gov.au or ask your doctor or health professional for a copy of the *Listeria and food* pamphlet.

Cooking foods thoroughly kills listeria, and reheated foods should also be steaming hot. FSANZ advises following normal good food hygiene practices, such as thoroughly washing and drying hands, utensils and chopping boards, cooking meat, chicken and fish right through, and keeping raw and cooked foods separate to avoid cross-contamination.

Symptoms of listeriosis include fever, headache, tiredness, aches and pains, and in some cases diarrhoea, nausea and abdominal cramps. These symptoms can progress to illnesses such as meningitis and septicaemia. While pregnant women may experience only mild symptoms, listeriosis can result in miscarriage, premature birth or, in rare cases, stillbirth.

To find out more about safe food handling, go to the Food Safety Information Council website, www.foodsafety.asn.au.

Credit to you

I received a letter from the Commonwealth Bank to advise me that an affinity credit card that a society had issued me with would soon cease to be, and that I would be transferred to a Commonwealth Bank credit card.

Sounds innocuous enough till you realise it means going from *no* annual fee to one of \$114. Ouch. I've written to ask them to cancel my card, citing the fee increase as the motivation for my decision.

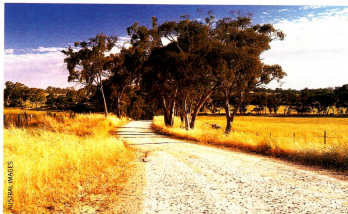
Thank you, CHOICE, for making me realise that I don't have to accept this kind of thing and can change. Before becoming a subscriber I might have accepted such an edict from the bank and not thought about the alternatives. Now I know better.

Barbara Spadaro
Toowoomba, Qld

Unhappy campers

We recently sought and won orders for a refund of the greater part of the purchase price of a Jayco Hawk Outback camper trailer in the NSW Consumer, Trader & Tenancy Tribunal (Motor Vehicle Division). We claimed, and the CTTT upheld, that the design and construction of the camper were not fit for the use for which it was promoted and sold — that is, travel on unsealed roads in outback Australia.

In essence, although the vehicle was not taken 'off-road'



and was driven on well-travelled unsealed roads, it proved incapable of coping with outback conditions: stones damaged an inadequately protected underbody, resulting in two brake failures, damaged shock absorbers and the loss of our water supply, as well as many other mechanical failures.

We believe that the limited warranty buyers are required to sign on delivery of their purchase — which excludes the trailer manufacturer from warranty for items including the suspension, fridge and windows — may have deterred many consumers from attempting the redress that we've sought.

We're concerned that, like us, many other consumers may buy these trailers, believing them to be appropriately designed and constructed for the conditions that may be encountered in remote areas. Our experience has shown, and the CTTT has

confirmed, that this is not always the case. At the very least we believe the promotional term 'outback' should be withdrawn from the description of certain camper trailers.

In our case, Robert was sufficiently experienced in mechanical repairs to deal with the catastrophes that befell us hundreds of kilometres from assistance. However, not many consumers will be able to deal with such events and it's not inconceivable that such failures could end in a fatality.

Robert and Vicki Sanderson
Cremorne, NSW

CHOICE thinks the industry needs to devise a standard for vehicles that includes some definition of what potentially misleading terms like 'outback' mean. In the meantime, just because a vehicle is labelled with 'bush' branding doesn't mean it can cope in all conditions.

THUMBS UP!



■ Sylvia Townsend gives a thumbs-up to **McPHERSON'S HOUSEWARES** of Bundoora, Victoria, which replaced her favourite knife free of charge 10 years out of its warranty after it snapped in the dishwasher.

■ Carol Richardson awards **DYSON APPLIANCES** a thumbs-up for repairing her vacuum cleaner, which was one year out of warranty. **DYSON** picked it up, replaced the motorhead, cleaned it, delivered it back and gave her two more years' warranty on the new part, all free of charge.

Driving tests undertaken recently by some newspapers demonstrated that even some 4WDs promoted as 'off-road' vehicles weren't up to coping with all outback conditions.

We contacted Jayco about Robert and Vicki's claims about its product:

■ Jayco strongly disputes that its Outback range is unsuitable for use on unsealed roads. It does however note in its sales brochures and online that they aren't suitable for use on off-road or 4WD tracks and it discourages owners from towing them over 'rougher terrain' and at excessive speed.

■ The company says it's sold thousands of Outback units to consumers who haven't experienced any of the problems raised in the letter or at the tribunal. And it points out that it offered the Sandersons a new trailer prior to the action they took.

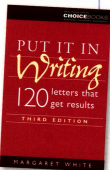
■ Jayco says that for the most part the limited warranty it uses only excludes items covered by separate manufacturer warranties, including non-standard parts and/or items requested by customers, and that owners are never left without warranty protection.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to *Thumbs Up* at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month.' This month's winners, Robert and Vicki Sanderson of Cremorne, NSW, receive *Put It in Writing* (3rd Edition), or any other book of their choice from *Consumer Bookshelf*, pages 47–48.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.



Pool fences — major safety failures



More than half the fences we tested failed a key Australian standard test.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ 18 out of 31 pool fences failed to meet a key safety aspect of the Australian standard.

■ All pool fences of the same type look much the same, making it impossible to tell visually whether they'd pass or fail the standard.

■ Pool fences aren't a substitute for constant adult supervision — especially given the failures our test found.

The campaign to fence Australian swimming pools has no doubt saved the lives of many toddlers. In all states and territories, in most situations, pool fencing is the law. But are the regulations as good as they could be? What about the fences themselves — do they meet Australian standard requirements? And who's checking to make sure they do? CHOICE set out to find some answers.

OUR TEST

We couldn't test every pool fence made in Australia — there are simply too many. So we spot-checked 31 tubular-metal fences made or sold by 16 manufacturers/distributors from the Sydney, Gosford and Wollongong areas, to see if they met Australian standard safety requirements. We specifically asked for pool fencing, and we're confident the 31 samples tested are representative of pool fencing available all over the country.

Our market research indicated that most pool fence gates use the same brand of magnetic catch.

Also, key safety aspects of gates depend on how well they're installed. For these reasons we focused on testing just fences. We looked mostly at two basic styles, flat-top and loop-top tubular-metal fences (see the photo, far right).

We tested to the clauses of the Australian standard dealing with mechanical performance, to check whether the fences are strong enough to be safe.

We also checked the fences to see if they met the dimensional requirements of the standard. These are important to ensure they're high enough and there are no footholds (so that young children can't climb the fence), and that gaps between the fence bars aren't too wide (which might allow youngsters to easily squeeze through the fence).

DIMENSIONALLY SOUND ...

The good news is that all the fences passed the dimensional aspects of the standard, which means young children shouldn't be able to climb over the fence or gain footholds to do so. And the gaps between the bars have the right dimensions to prevent small children from squeezing through them.

... BUT SOME ARE TOO FLIMSY

However, squeezing through the bars is more than just a question of dimensions. As our testing shows, it's also related to the mechanical strength of the fence.

One key Australian standard safety test is the 'strength and rigidity of openings'. The standard requires fence bars to resist a minimum force of 150 Newtons, applied between the bars using a probe of standard dimensions. This is a test to see if the fence is strong and rigid enough to prevent an opening being made between bars that a young child could fit through. We tested all the gaps between bars in one panel of each fence brand.

Unfortunately our testing found that over half the fences failed this key test (18 fences out of 31 tested).

This is a serious failure and means children have a much greater chance of squeezing through these fences into unacceptable danger. While the table on page 10 lists the brands we tested that passed and failed, we're confident this isn't a problem that's confined to the Sydney/Gosford/Wollongong area. It's likely to be repeated all over Australia. (See *Action needed* on page 12.)

LOOP-TOP SAFER THAN FLAT

In our testing, the overwhelming majority of fences that failed the standard's strength and rigidity of

openings test had a flat-top design, in which tubular vertical bars are fixed and spot-welded inside flat horizontal upper and lower rails. In fact, 14 flat-top fences out of 16 tested failed this particular test.

However, fences with a loop design, in which tubular sections of pipe are bent through upper rails, mostly passed (there were four failures of the 15 loop-top fences tested).

In most cases we were able to compare a manufacturer's basic flat-top fence with its loop-top design. We did this to keep other manufacturing factors as constant as possible.

While both types of fence are around the same overall height, a significant difference is that the top horizontal rail sits lower on a loop-top fence. One consequence of this is that the length of the bars between the rails is greater in a flat-top fence (on average by around 11 cm). While we can't say conclusively that it's the reason, this extra length between the rails may well contribute to reducing the rigidity of the bars. (See the photo, above right.)

So although two products passed the tests, if you're about to erect a pool fence our results suggest that generally your best bet is to avoid the tubular-metal flat-top design.

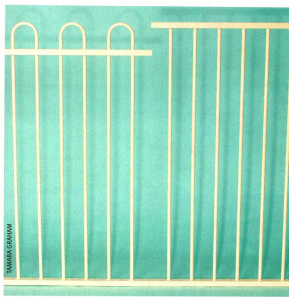
MIND THE GAP

When we sent manufacturers the results of our tests, several told us their fences had been tested by other expert laboratories and found to pass the Australian standard test for strength and rigidity of openings — results seemingly in conflict with ours. In some cases this testing was recent and in others it was performed some time ago. We have no reason to think other test labs did the testing inaccurately, and we certainly carried out the tests correctly. So what's going on?

Even though all gap dimensions between bars complied with standard requirements, in the course of our testing we often found a variation of several millimetres in the distances between the bars of the same fence panel. And during our testing, it became obvious that a fence tended to fail where the gap was wider. Significantly, gaps that failed the standard rigidity test were often just a couple of millimetres wider than nearby gaps in the same panel that passed.

What this suggests to us is that there isn't much room to move in terms of manufacturing tolerances, particularly for flat-top fences, which our results indicate are more prone to failure anyway. A couple of millimetres can make the difference between pass and fail. (Other factors, such as variations in the rigidity of bar material, could be important too.)

In fact one distributor of a flat-top fence that failed the standard test for strength and rigidity of openings



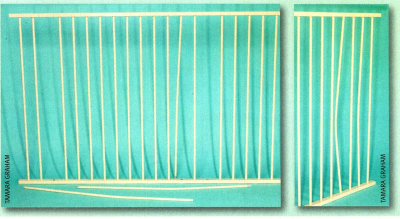
The horizontal top rail sits around 11 cm lower on a loop-top than a flat-top fence. This seems to increase the rigidity of the bars and make a fence more likely to pass the standard 'strength and rigidity of openings' test (see left).

Overall, the worst fence we tested was sold by South Coast Powdercoating. Not only did this flat-top fence fail the 'strength and rigidity of openings' test, but it was the only fence that failed the other Australian standard mechanical strength test — the 'strength of fencing components' test.

This test assesses whether the bars and other fixtures are strong enough. Three bars (out of 27 in the panel we tested) broke free from the bottom rail and, of these, two fell out of the top rail. All it took was a force that could be easily applied by someone accidentally (but heavily) bumping into the fence. Another two bars bent by more than the standard permits (see the photos below). This is a serious failure — once

bars have broken away or bent too much, it becomes a cinch for a toddler to gain entry to the pool.

When we told the fence manufacturer our results, he claimed the fence we'd bought wasn't a pool fence. However, our tester had specifically asked for pool fencing and been given the panel we tested as such — a very poor state of affairs in itself. The manufacturer said he had other "fully tested and certified" pool fencing available, which we should have tested instead. We agreed to test this fencing as well; it also failed the standard 'strength and rigidity of openings' test but passed the 'strength of fencing components' test, which the first panel failed.



TEST: Pool fencing

told us that its fence was made by another manufacturer — and that manufacturer's flat-top fence had passed our test. We weren't able to confirm this with the other manufacturer, but it seems to back up our hypothesis that manufacturing tolerances can be a factor that makes the difference between pass and fail.

Ensuring that all gaps are a couple of millimetres narrower, tightening control of manufacturing tolerances or using inherently stronger materials might be steps that manufacturers could take to eliminate fence failures.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The results of our tests suggest pool fencing that doesn't meet the standard is likely to be available all over the country, and that visually there's no way to tell a fence that will pass from one that will fail the relevant test. That's bad news whether you're buying a fence now or already have one. The best advice we can offer is:

- With 14 failures out of 16 tubular-metal flat-top fences, it's hard to buy that type of fence with confidence.
- Always supervise children when they're in a yard where there's a pool.



SPEAR TOPS AND OTHER DESIGNS

We also tested two spear-top fences to see how they compared to flat and loop-tops. Spear-tops are similar to loop-tops in that the top horizontal rail sits around 11 cm lower than on a flat-top fence, which seems to increase the rigidity of the bars.

One spear-top fence passed and the other failed the 'strength and rigidity of openings' test, though the one that failed did so only in one place. However, we didn't test enough spear-top samples to draw firm conclusions about the design.

We also tested two fences of a totally different design, ARC Weldmesh, which is available nationally (see the photo, above right). Both passed all tests, so you might want to consider it as an alternative to tubular-metal pool fencing.

Brand (in alphabetical order within each fence type)

FLAT-TOP

Brand	Construction material	1 Australian Standard 'strength and rigidity of openings' test	2 Australian Standard 'strength of fencing components' test
5 STAR FENCING & GATES (A) (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (one)	Pass
AMAZING FENCING	Tubular aluminium	Fail (all)	Pass
ARC (B) (C)	Tubular steel	Fail (most)	Pass
BG FENCING	Tubular steel	Fail (all)	Pass
BORESI	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
DUNN & FARRUGIA (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (all)	Pass
FENCING & GATE CENTRE (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (several)	Pass
FENCING MANUFACTURERS (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (all)	Pass
JNI Newline	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
KELUI TOOLING	Tubular steel	Fail (most)	Pass
PEAK (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (two)	Pass
POOLSAFE FENCING	Tubular steel	Fail (all)	Pass
R&N FENCING (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (all)	Pass
SOUTH COAST POWDERCOATING (A)	Tubular aluminium	Fail (all)	Fail (five) (D)
THE FENCE SHOP	Tubular steel	Fail (one)	Pass
TRI-LINE (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (all)	Pass

LOOP-TOP

5 STAR FENCING & GATES (B)	Tubular aluminium	Fail (several)	Pass
AMAZING FENCING	Tubular aluminium	Pass	Pass
ARC (C)	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
BG FENCING	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
BORESI	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
DUNN & FARRUGIA	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
FENCING & GATE CENTRE	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
FENCING MANUFACTURERS	Tubular aluminium	Pass	Pass
JNI Regent	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
KELUI TOOLING	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
POOLSAFE FENCING	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
R&N FENCING (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (one)	Pass
SOUTH COAST POWDERCOATING (A)	Tubular aluminium	Fail (all)	Pass
THE FENCE SHOP	Tubular steel	Pass	Pass
TRI-LINE (B)	Tubular steel	Fail (two)	Pass

(A) At the manufacturer's request we tested another panel, which also failed the 'strength and rigidity of openings' test.

(B) After receiving CHOICE's results, this manufacturer indicated that it would take, or was already taking, steps to rectify the problem.

(C) ARC is the only nationally available brand we found. At the manufacturer's request we tested another flat-top fence panel, this time of aluminium, which also failed the 'strength and rigidity of openings' test.

(D) Another panel we tested at the manufacturer's request passed this test (see page 9).

1 Australian Standard 'strength and rigidity of openings' test

This is AS 1926.1-1993 Section 3, clause 3.1. Where a fence failed, we've also shown the number of times (in different places) that it failed. A fence that failed in only one or two test spots still fails the standard, but is safer than one that failed in most or all test spots. We tested every gap on a panel of fencing that was between 1.4 m and 2.5 m long. See *But some are too flimsy*, page 8, for more details of this test.

2 Australian Standard 'strength of fencing components' test

This is AS 1926.1-1993 Section 3, clause 3.3.1. It assesses whether the bars and other fixtures are strong enough.

Getting serious about drownings

Zero tolerance should be the goal when it comes to toddler drownings. Sadly, we've got a way to go — according to the Royal Life Saving Society Australia's National Drowning Report 2003, 17 toddlers drowned in Australian swimming pools in 2002/2003. If there's any comfort to be found in this tragic loss, it's that, on average, fewer toddlers now drown in swimming pools each year. During the period 1996 to 2000, the yearly average was 24 drowning deaths.

MOST AT RISK

The children most at risk of drowning in a private swimming pool are two-year-old boys. Statistics from NSW suggest that about two-thirds of drowning deaths in the birth to five age group are male and about one-third of all deaths are two-year-olds. The most common drowning location is the swimming pool: Australian statistics show that's where about half of toddler drowning fatalities happen.

And it's not just drowning we have to worry about. Serious near drownings occur at three to four times the rate of fatal drownings, with between 5% and 20% of these children experiencing some form of permanent brain damage.

WHAT'S WORKING

Experts in injury prevention credit the decline in toddler drowning deaths to both the advent of formal requirements for pool fencing and public water-safe information campaigns.

Numerous studies both here and overseas confirm that fencing pools saves lives. For example, one showed that four-sided fencing (which completely isolates the pool from the house) and three-sided perimeter fencing (which still allows access to the pool from the house) both significantly lower the risk of drowning compared to unfenced pools. However, another early study, conducted in WA in 1988, showed four-sided fencing to be significantly safer than three-sided.

One effect of this and similar studies has been to make experts in injury prevention and health policy call for mandatory four-sided fencing (see *Action needed*, page 12, for more on this). A building wall can form part of a four-sided fence as long as there are no doors, and windows are secure.

REGULAR INSPECTIONS

In WA, state law requires local councils to inspect each pool fence every four years. One clear benefit of regular mandatory inspections is that they increase compliance with dimensional and environmental aspects of the standard that help make pool fences safer.

An audit of pool fencing inspection records from a random sample of the majority of local councils in WA

showed an average compliance level of 45% at first inspection. This increased to 71% by the third inspection — still not perfect, but much safer for children.

WHAT ISN'T WORKING

Despite this good example, state government regulation of pool fences has some serious gaps that need to be addressed urgently.

The lack of regular mandatory inspections elsewhere in Australia is demonstrated by the fact that numerous studies have shown that around half the pool fences in the country fail to meet key aspects of the appropriate legislation — those aspects being the Australian standard requirements relating to fence dimensions and installation.

As one expert commentator, describing the situation in NSW, put it, "Compliance of domestic swimming pools with the requirements of legislation remains an ongoing problem."

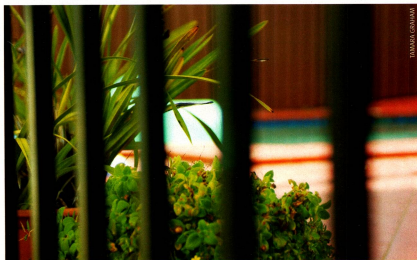
Another significant problem — and one which our test highlights — is that while state and territory legislation around the country, as far as we could determine, calls for pool fences to meet *all* requirements of the Australian standard, there's no mandatory product safety scheme in place to ensure pool fences do meet these requirements. While some local councils may insist on viewing test certificates from manufacturers stating that the pool fence complies with all Australian standards, including mechanical performance, this is largely a piecemeal approach and (as our tests show) not as reliable as a mandatory product safety compliance scheme.

WHAT THE STATS SAY

WA injury research experts examined coronial records relating to drowning of children under five in that state for the period 1988 to 2000. They found that 50% of pool

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Generally, responsibility for ensuring pool fencing complies with the appropriate legislation rests with local councils or private building certifiers. With few exceptions, all private backyard swimming pools must be fenced, but specific requirements vary from council to council. So if you're about to erect a pool fence, contact your local council for specific advice.



Pool safety: 'keep watch' is the key

To ensure maximum pool safety, follow these guidelines:

- Always supervise toddlers and youngsters when they're in or around a pool. And don't leave that responsibility to an older child.
- Make sure your pool fence and gate are in good condition. In particular, check that the catch on the gate locks automatically whenever the gate closes.
- Never prop the gate open.
- Make sure there are no objects left near the fence that young children could use as a climbing aid.
- If you have three-sided pool fencing that allows access to the pool through your house, upgrade to four-sided fencing — it's safer. In the meantime, make sure all doors and windows leading to the pool are secure. This is vital if you have young children or any visit your home.

- Most drownings occur between 4 pm and 6 pm, a peak period of pool use that also coincides with supervisory distractions such as socialising and meal preparation — so don't get distracted: keep alert, or make sure another adult watches the kids.
- The Royal Life Saving Society Australia recommends at least one member of a household be trained in resuscitation.
- It's also recommend that a guide to resuscitation be prominently displayed near the pool (some councils make this mandatory).
- Familiarise your toddlers and young children with water and teach them to swim as early as possible — but don't regard this as a replacement for good fencing and adult supervision.

fences in those cases were compliant with legislated requirements at the time of drowning. However, even with the fences that complied, 43% of drownings occurred by the child gaining entry to the pool via the house (which strongly suggests a three-sided fence was in use).

Another 43% of the tragedies were attributed to the pool gate being propped open. In less than 5% of deaths was non-compliant pool fencing found to be the culprit.

Another study conducted by the Queensland Injury Surveillance Unit looked at drownings in Queensland in the toddler age group (birth to four years) over the years 1992–2001.

Excluding cases where it wasn't possible to classify the type of pool fencing, this study found that 26% of toddler drownings occurred in unfenced pools and another 22% resulted from the toddler gaining access through defective house doors (three-sided fencing).

Next most commonly (14%), toddlers drowned because they gained access through defective gates. In 6% of drownings the problem identified was defective fencing, in which holes or missing bars were found.

These studies suggest that structural weakness of pool fences isn't the most significant factor in toddler drownings. So are the results of our tests really much to worry about?

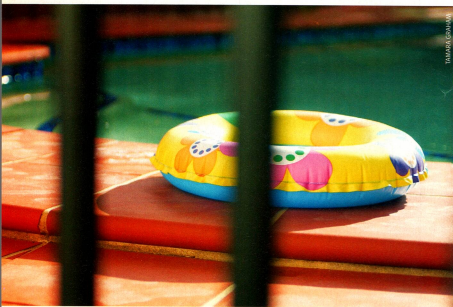
Yes: while the available data suggests the risk isn't the highest posed by domestic swimming pools, just one tragic accident is too many — especially when the problem shouldn't exist in the first place.

And one TV report described how two toddlers were able either to squeeze or break their way through a pool fence — the very failure our tests detected with flat-top fences. In both cases, vigilant mothers saved them.

ACTION NEEDED

CHOICE wants to see the following steps taken urgently:

- The fences we found that failed any standard test need to be withdrawn from sale immediately. Consumers who've bought one of them should be able to have it replaced with a safe model at no cost.
- State and federal governments need to work together to develop a mandatory product safety scheme to ensure all pool fences will meet *all* requirements of the Australian standard. Scrutiny of manufacturer-supplied test certificates by some councils doesn't go far enough, as our tests show.
- Despite some public reluctance and government lethargy in the past, it's clear that four-sided pool fencing is safer than fencing that allows access to the pool from the house. Four-sided pool fencing should be made mandatory across Australia.
- The WA example shows that regular council inspection of pool fences helps ensure they meet the standard's requirements. CHOICE thinks adoption of mandatory council inspections across the rest of Australia (every four years at least) would help save more children's lives.



Takeaway bugs

We've probably all at one time or another left a restaurant full, content and carrying a 'doggy bag' containing leftover food. Often it sits on the table while you drink coffee and pay the bill. It may only go into the fridge much later, and might be eaten several hours or days after the food was prepared. It probably wouldn't occur to us that this food, which was delicious in the restaurant, could make us sick.

But food in doggy bags can spend a lot of time in the temperature danger zone — between 5°C and 60°C — where bacteria that commonly cause food poisoning grow very well. Not only that, but it's also half-eaten, so has been touched — and perhaps contaminated — by potentially dirty hands, mouths or utensils.

Some restaurants may choose not to provide doggy bags because of potential hygiene issues, but it's still a relatively common practice. In order to reduce the risk of food poisoning from doggy bags, the NSW Food Authority is advising consumers that:

- Food in doggy bags should be refrigerated as soon as possible.
- Leftover food that doesn't make it into the fridge (and get chilled below 5°C) within four hours should be thrown away.
- When reheating food, it should be heated until it's piping hot (above 75°C) for at least two minutes. At this temperature you should see steam coming off the food, and the middle should be very hot to touch.



PHOTOS: TAMARA GRAHAM

CRAVING POWER

People who say they're addicted to chocolate may now have scientific evidence to back up their claim.

Researchers in New York took brain scans of healthy people and found that their brains 'lit up' when they saw and smelled their favourite foods. The presentation of food significantly increased metabolism in the whole brain, including the area associated with feelings of hunger and desire for food — the same brain region that's linked with drug craving in drug addicts.

The researchers think these findings could help explain the compulsion and lack of control in the eating behaviour of some obese people.



Bunless burgers are a pretty strange concept...

Fast-food fads

Fast-food companies in the US will apparently do anything to jump on the low-carbohydrate Atkins Diet bandwagon.

KFC last year ran controversial ads promoting its fried chicken as the low-carb alternative to burgers — but failed to mention the high saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and salt content of the product.

Many US chains, including **BURGER KING**, now sell low-carb burgers — low-carb because they're served without the bun (in a bowl, or wrapped in lettuce, instead).

And now the US **McDONALD'S** website provides tips for people who're keeping tabs on carbohydrates. While most of the suggestions appear logical, if a little bizarre (let's face it, bunless burgers are a pretty strange concept), the tips to order an extra grilled chicken breast fillet for your sandwich or eat a double order of scrambled eggs for breakfast seem to miss the point.

While it would certainly increase your comparative intake of protein and fat vs carbs, we fail to see how eating more chicken or eggs would actually cut your carb intake!

DISPENSING ADVICE

We investigate the quality of advice doled out in pharmacies.



IN A NUTSHELL

■ Advice given in 58 out of the 87 pharmacies we visited was rated 'poor' by our experts. The pharmacy profession needs to improve the quality of advice being given to consumers.

■ Speaking to a pharmacist rather than a pharmacy assistant didn't guarantee good advice.

■ In a price spot-check of two of the products our researchers bought, the most expensive of each product in a supermarket was still cheaper than the cheapest pharmacy price for the same item (see What price is right?, far right).

Retail pharmacy in Australia is a highly protected industry. In most states only pharmacists can own a pharmacy, and there are restrictions on where new pharmacies can be located.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia, the organisation that represents 4500 pharmacy businesses, argues that the regulations are necessary to allow pharmacies to provide high-quality, free health advice and information to consumers.

Recently there's been talk of supermarket chains opening in-store pharmacies, a move which has been strongly opposed by the guild. The essence of its argument is that consumers wouldn't receive the same quality of healthcare advice in a supermarket-owned pharmacy as they would in a pharmacist-owned pharmacy.

But a 1997 CHOICE 'shadow shop' (where researchers act out potential consumer scenarios) in pharmacies found that poor advice was given for the sale of an asthma inhaler in nearly half the 200 pharmacies visited, suggesting that pharmacies weren't reliably

delivering high-quality advice across the board.

We decided to take an up-to-date look at the issue, this time testing pharmacies with three different scenarios (see CHOICE's undercover visits, page 16, for details).

COUNTER ADVICE

The advice given in 58 of the 87 pharmacies visited was deemed 'poor' by our expert panel (see Our experts, page 16), and our researchers received 'good' advice on only one in five occasions.

For all three scenarios, a well-trained pharmacy assistant should have the ability to ask the relevant questions and make the appropriate recommendations, or refer a customer to the pharmacist if in any doubt. For our visits, the first contact was nearly always an assistant, and almost 80% of the visits where researchers dealt solely with an assistant were classed 'poor'. But speaking to a pharmacist didn't guarantee good advice. Of the 11 visits where contact was solely with the pharmacist, six were classed as 'poor', one as 'OK' and only four as 'good'.

On their best behaviour?

On the first day of pharmacy visits, CHOICE found out via the media that details of our trial had been leaked. Pharmaceutical Society of Australia members in Adelaide had been urged to be "on their best behaviour" while the shadow shop was being conducted.

At that point only a handful of pharmacies had been visited, so we stopped the trial: the leak could have both affected the findings and compromised our researchers. We started the full pharmacy shadow shop again at a later date, having replaced the most identifiable scenario with another.

However, the initial findings at six pharmacies, with a scenario concerning the herbal remedy St John's wort, were an interesting pointer to the findings of the shadow shop reported here. In four cases the (female) researcher was sold the herb without being warned that it could interact with oral contraceptives, increasing the risk of unwanted pregnancy. And its main side effects — drowsiness and increased sensitivity to sunlight — weren't mentioned in any visit.

A far from high-quality result even when some pharmacies perhaps knew it could be CHOICE asking the questions!

Good-practice guidelines on providing information about medicines exist. But in many of our researchers' consultations, staff — both pharmacists and assistants — didn't ask enough questions to ensure that the medicines were appropriate. And even when some of the relevant questions were asked, the quality of the subsequent advice was often poor anyway.

One way to improve this would be an increased usage of 'shelf talkers' — written reminders on shelves where certain medications are stored, prompting pharmacy staff to ask questions such as, "Are you on any medication?", and detailing the procedure to follow ("Refer customer to pharmacist", for example) if given a relevant response.

OUR VERDICT

Our results indicate that restricting pharmacy ownership to pharmacists doesn't necessarily guarantee good advice for consumers. In fact consumers are often receiving poor advice, and this isn't acceptable. The pharmacy profession needs to improve the quality of the advice provided to consumers.

What price is right?

The price we paid for the different medications in our scenarios varied considerably among pharmacies.

- The lowest price we paid for **BLACKMORES Korean Ginseng** (60 tablets) was \$20.20 in a Wollongong pharmacy; the highest was \$24.75 in pharmacies in Adelaide's city centre and Glenelg — that's a difference of \$4.55.
- The cheapest **IMODIUM** (eight caplets) was \$8.50, bought in a Burwood pharmacy in Sydney. We paid \$3.20 more for the same product in a pharmacy in Elizabeth Grove, Adelaide.
- The cheapest **MYLANTA Original** (200 mL) we bought in a pharmacy cost us \$4.50; the most expensive was 60 cents dearer.
- The prices for **NUROFEN** (24 tablets) ranged from \$4.95 in five Adelaide and Sydney pharmacies to \$6.95 in a pharmacy in South Plympton, Adelaide.

For comparison, we did a price spot-check on these **MYLANTA Original** and **NUROFEN** products sold in four Sydney stores of the two major supermarket chains. The **MYLANTA** prices in these four supermarkets varied from \$3.97 to \$4.15, while the **NUROFEN** ranged from \$4.49 to \$4.54. The most expensive of each product was cheaper than the cheapest pharmacy price for the same items.

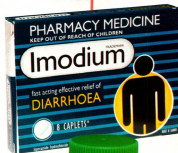
All retailers have a profit margin, so you'd expect some variation in prices, and some pharmacy chains probably have greater buying power than individual pharmacies and so can sell at cheaper prices. However, there's some evidence that restricting pharmacy ownership may be limiting competition and make prices for some medicines higher than they would otherwise be, and the results of our spot-check seem to support this.

To get the best value for your money, we suggest that:

- If the pharmacist recommends a brand-name medication, ask if there's a cheaper version of the same thing on the market. For example, some chain pharmacies have their own brand of non-prescription ('over-the-counter') treatments that are cheaper.
- You compare prices at several pharmacies for medication you need regularly — prices for over-the-counter drugs can vary considerably from one to another, so it's worthwhile shopping around.



PHOTO: TAMARA GIBBARD



CHOICE's undercover visits

In May, three female CHOICE researchers visited a total of 87 pharmacies — both chains and independents — in Sydney, the Wollongong area and Adelaide. Before their pharmacy visits we gave the researchers relevant information and trained them to act out three scenarios, which we'd developed in consultation with experts in the pharmacy industry. The scenarios were each used a minimum of 25 times, with each researcher acting out all three scenarios. Each pharmacy was visited only once, with one scenario.

The researchers completed a detailed questionnaire immediately after each visit, recording the questions they were asked, who assisted them, the advice they were given and what medications, if any, they were sold. A panel of experts used the data to evaluate each visit and rate the quality of the outcome.

OUR EXPERTS

Our panel consisted of three experienced professionals from the pharmacy industry: a community pharmacist with a special interest in naturopathy; a senior pharmacy technician who works in clinical pharmacy services at a major metropolitan hospital; and a pharmacist who acts as a consultant to the pharmaceutical industry.

Get the most from your pharmacy

Our research shows you may not be asked all the necessary questions when you're buying medicines or present a set of symptoms in a pharmacy. If you need advice about a health problem or medicine, you're more likely to get appropriate advice if you volunteer as much information as possible, and ask a number of key questions.

Tell the pharmacist:

- About your symptoms: what they are, how long you've had them, whether you've had them before, and what you think caused them.
- About any other medications you're taking — both prescribed and those bought over-the-counter (not forgetting herbal and other alternative remedies).
- If you're pregnant or might be pregnant.
- About any other conditions, illnesses or allergies you have.

When buying medicines ask:

- What the medicine does, how it works, and why you need to take it.
- How long you will need to take it, and how soon it should work.
- How often and when you should take it.
- Whether you should avoid any other medicines, drinks, food or activities while you're taking the medicine.
- About any possible risks, interactions or side effects that you should be aware of.

Don't buy a medicine until you're clear about the answers. If you have any doubts, consult your doctor before taking over-the-counter medications. Also, make sure you read the patient information leaflet, which should include details about the above points.

SCENARIO 1: TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Our researchers said they had diarrhoea and asked for something to treat it.

What should happen

We wanted to find out if pharmacists and assistants gave appropriate advice when presented with a set of symptoms.

They should have asked how long our researcher had been suffering from diarrhoea, and if they'd seen a doctor. In doing so, they would have been given the response that the researcher had been experiencing diarrhoea on and off since returning from a holiday to Malaysia a few weeks ago and had not seen a doctor.

This information should have set off alarm bells: persistent diarrhoea after a trip to South-east Asia may indicate a serious infection needing treatment with antibiotics. So it wasn't regarded as sufficient to sell a medication such as **IMODIUM** or **HARMONISE** (which alleviate diarrhoea but don't treat the cause), even with advice on how it should be taken, or to advise the researcher to drink plenty of fluids to keep hydrated. In order to be judged as 'OK' or better, the pharmacist or assistant had to recommend that the researcher see a doctor.

Visits where the researcher received a combination of relevant questioning, good advice about the medication or rehydration as well as a recommendation to see a doctor were classified as 'good'.



What we found

12 good, 5 OK and 13 poor visits.

- In just over half the visits researchers were asked how long they'd had diarrhoea, and as a result of their answer were told to see a doctor.
- On 13 occasions staff sold our researchers **IMODIUM** (or similar medication) without asking about the duration of the diarrhoea, and in only one of these visits was the researcher advised to see a doctor if the medication didn't work.

Particularly poor practice

On one visit, our researcher was sold **IMODIUM** capsules that had been dispensed into a plastic vial labelled with dosage information. The assistant checked that the medication was for the researcher's personal use, but apart from that no questions were asked and no advice was given.

Without the original packaging, which advises you to see your doctor if diarrhoea persists after taking the medication, our researcher could have been at risk. If the symptoms had been real, she could still be suffering from an undiagnosed infection.

SCENARIO 2: ALTERNATIVE REMEDY

Our researchers said they were feeling tired and short of energy, and asked if Korean ginseng would help.

What should happen

Pharmacy staff selling Korean ginseng ought to be aware that it can interact with medications such as blood-thinning drugs and antidepressants.

To demonstrate this awareness at a level of 'OK' or better, the pharmacist or pharmacy assistant had to ask the researcher if she was taking any other medication or had any other conditions (such as high blood pressure or pregnancy) for which she might be taking such medications. If asked, the researcher answered 'no' to these questions.

- In addition, to be scored as 'good', staff should have:
 - Asked about possible underlying problems that could explain the researcher's fatigue.
 - Asked if the researcher had taken ginseng before, and advised that it shouldn't be taken long-term.

What we found

2 good, 5 OK and 18 poor visits.

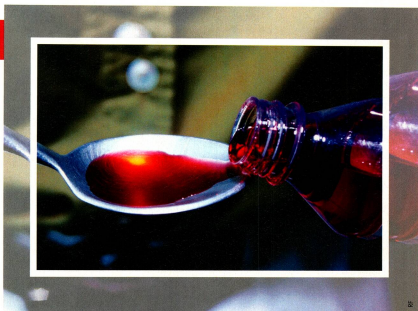
- Ginseng was sold to our researchers in 23 out of 25 visits. In only five of these were they asked questions that showed the staff identified that Korean ginseng could interact with other medication.
- In 16 of the visits, our researchers were sold ginseng with no questions asked.
- The assistant at one pharmacy recommended Korean ginseng as she had taken some on her wedding day as a pick-me-up, and a pharmacist endorsed the product as he used to take it himself, but neither gave any advice or information about the product.
- Twice we were sold Korean ginseng past its use-by date — one researcher was sold it at half price for this reason.
- In seven pharmacies alternative products for boosting energy levels, such as vitamin B or multivitamins, were mentioned or suggested, but in two of these visits ginseng was still sold with no questions asked to identify potential interactions.
- Only five pharmacies gave the researcher information about not using ginseng for too long.

SCENARIO 3: TUMMY TROUBLES?

Our researchers purchased both **NUROFEN** (a well-recognised brand of the painkiller ibuprofen) and **MYLANTA** (an antacid treatment for indigestion that acts by neutralising acid in the stomach) from the pharmacy.

What should happen

Ibuprofen can aggravate stomach ulcers and cause stomach upsets and other symptoms. People may



misinterpret these symptoms as indigestion and take antacid to soothe them, leaving the real problem untreated or causing a vicious circle by taking more ibuprofen.

A pharmacist or pharmacy assistant should pick someone buying an antacid together with ibuprofen as potentially having this problem. Indeed Peter Carroll, dean of the Australian College of Pharmacy Practice, was quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in February (while promoting pharmacist-owned pharmacies on the grounds of high-quality healthcare advice), saying: "If you were buying antacids and ibuprofen together from a pharmacy, it would be picked up as a sign that there may be a problem."

So in order to be judged as 'OK' or better, the pharmacist or pharmacy assistant had to recognise the potential for an underlying problem. They should have asked if the researcher took the two products together, to establish whether or not this could be the case. If the reason for asking these questions was explained to the researcher, the visit was rated as 'good'.

KEY TO THE PIE CHARTS

- Good
- OK
- Poor

What we found

5 good, 27 poor visits.

- On 14 visits, the only questions asked, if any at all, were about the **NUROFEN** packet size required, or if the researcher wanted **MYLANTA** in liquid or tablet form, or the regular or double-strength version.
- On 13 visits, staff went a step further, asking researchers if they'd taken the medication before, and in some cases giving the advice that **NUROFEN** should be taken with food.
- Only in five cases were researchers asked if the products were for their personal use, and if they took them at the same time. Staff in these visits not only asked the relevant questions, they also explained why there could be a potential problem taking these medications at the same time, and gave advice about taking **NUROFEN**. These five visits were rated 'good'.

Not all they're cracked up to be

More than half the supermarket eggs tested failed our freshness test.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ Even with plenty of time before the 'best before' date, more than half the eggs we tested had weak and watery whites, indicating that they're not fresh. We even found big variations in the quality of eggs from the same box.

■ Free-range eggs are a tad more likely to be fresher than cage eggs — but there's no clear evidence that they taste better or are better for you nutritionally.

Are you having trouble frying eggs these days? Do the yolks often break and the whites spread all over the pan? You'll be pleased to know it's probably nothing to do with your cooking skills — rather it's a sign that the eggs are far from fresh.

We tested more than 300 eggs from supermarkets in Adelaide, Brisbane and Sydney and found that more than half of them failed to meet our quality standard and had the thin, watery whites you'd expect to see in eggs that are far from fresh.

Despite the fact that eggs are a perishable commodity, many supermarkets don't refrigerate them. They start to deteriorate from the time they're laid. The white gradually gets thinner, the yolk gets more fragile and the air space inside the egg gets bigger (this is why a stale egg floats in water). Older eggs can also develop a stronger flavour, which some people find less pleasant. The speed of these changes depends very much on temperature, so it's best to store eggs in the fridge when you get them home — and all supermarkets should be refrigerating them too.

EGGS CRACKED OPEN

We bought one box of each brand and type (cage, barn-laid and free-range) of eggs that we found in a Coles and a Woolworths supermarket in Adelaide, Brisbane and Sydney, ending up with one, two or three boxes for each brand. Where possible we chose one-dozen 700 g boxes and looked for the longest time before the best-before date (the average was just over four weeks). All our eggs were transported under chilled conditions and tested immediately on arrival at our labs.

Our tester randomly selected five eggs from each box, weighed them and then cracked them open one at a time onto a flat, white surface and measured the height of the white. A mathematical formula that combines the weight of the egg and

the thickness of the white gives an internationally recognised measure of egg freshness and quality called a Haugh unit.

There are now no prescribed Australian standards. The US standard, though, classifies eggs under 60 Haugh units as 'weak and watery', and this is the quality benchmark for freshness we used. Reasonably fresh eggs of good quality should have Haugh unit values of 60 or more; low-quality eggs have values of less than 40.

We were amazed at how many eggs failed this quality test (see the table, page 21). Of the eggs we tested, 11% had Haugh unit values below 40 and in all 53% had values below 60. We also found some big differences in the Haugh units of eggs from the same box (for example, 6–71 and 15–75), so finding a good-quality egg to cook for breakfast is a real lottery.

There was no consistent difference between the quality of eggs from the two big supermarket chains,





AUSTRALIAN IMAGES

Give the best-before date more clout

Egg boxes should always have a best-before date, which is put on when the eggs are packed. Unfortunately it's not as informative as it should be.

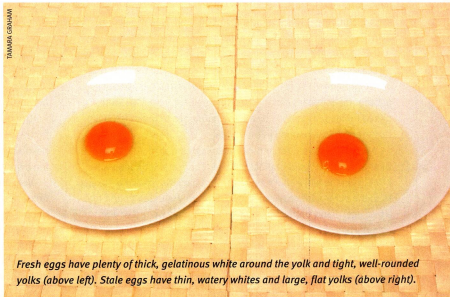
According to the Australian Egg Corporation's Code of Practice, the best-before date is worked out as five weeks or less from the date of laying. Curiously, though, nearly a third of the eggs we looked at still had five or more weeks left before the best-before date at the time we bought them.

In the EU, the best-before date can only be four weeks from the date of laying, and eggs can only be sold within three weeks of when they were laid. We'd like to see the same mandatory system here. You could then feel more confident of getting a box of reasonably fresh eggs.

or between eggs from the three state capitals we visited. But, on average, we found that free-range eggs (for how they're produced see *It's a chook's life*, page 21) are more likely to have higher Haugh unit values and thus are likely to be fresher and of better quality than cage eggs.

In the table we've ranked the different brands by 'fail rate'. Only **GOLDEN EGGS** (cage) and **GOLDEN EGGS Angle Vale** (free-range), both of which we found only in Adelaide, achieved the top score of zero failures (although the barn-laid **GOLDEN EGGS** had a 50% failure rate). Other brands that had fewer than 50% failures in our test were:

- **Cage:** HOME BRAND and CHANTECLAIR FARMS The Body Egg.
- **Barn:** COLES and SUNNY QUEEN FARMS Freedom.
- **Free-range:** MANNING VALLEY, PACE FARM Eco, COLES, and ECOEGGS (a separate brand, not to be confused with PACE FARM Eco).



Fresh eggs have plenty of thick, gelatinous white around the yolk and tight, well-rounded yolks (above left). Stale eggs have thin, watery whites and large, flat yolks (above right).

If you don't mind buying eggs from caged birds, **HOME BRAND** (from Woolworths) is the best value for money. The most expensive eggs we came across were **ECOEGBS** (free-range), which we found only in Sydney. They came in boxes of 10 rather than the usual dozen and when you allow for this in the price, they're more than \$7 per dozen.

STALE OR JUST POOR QUALITY?

According to the Australian Egg Corporation, eggs with low Haugh units aren't necessarily stale because the Haugh unit value can depend on the age of the hen, its diet and other factors, not just the age of the egg. It says there's no reason to believe they're inferior nutritionally.

Nonetheless, from the consumer's perspective, eggs with weak, watery whites are undoubtedly of poor quality. They don't fry well, the thin whites don't whip well, the fragile yolks make it harder to separate the yolk from the white when you need to, and it's almost impossible to poach such an egg because it doesn't hold together in the water.

WHY PAY EXTRA FOR FREE-RANGE OR BARN-LAID EGGS?

On average, we paid \$3.57 per dozen for cage eggs, \$5.38 for free-range and \$4.83 for barn-laid eggs.

So are free-range eggs better? They tend to have darker shells as well as darker yolks because the hens have access to grass. Many people swear they taste better, but research

THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER?

When we last tested eggs, in 1981, 42% failed the quality test with Haugh unit values below 60, compared with 53% this time — and we were amazed *then* at how many eggs failed.

In 1981 most states and territories had Egg Boards that controlled distribution and sale. Use-by dates were usually three weeks from the date of packing (and, at most, four weeks from the date of laying). Now, the best-before date is five weeks or more from the date of laying (see *Give the best-before date more clout*, page 19). Deregulation certainly hasn't benefited consumers in this regard.

hasn't yet shown any real differences between the flavour of free-range and cage eggs. And although one research project in the UK found a little more vitamin B₁₂ and folic acid in free-range eggs, there weren't enough differences between other nutrients to get excited about.

But what about the chooks? You might think it's worth paying extra to know that your eggs have come from "contented hens" that "range freely during daylight hours over natural sunny pastures" (as claimed on two of the free-range boxes). It may sound idyllic, but the cage versus free-range debate remains controversial and strong passions are aroused on both sides (see *It's a chook's life*, right).

Words, words, words ...

Suppliers have discovered that an egg box has plenty of surface area for promotional messages — some even have an additional outer cardboard sleeve, and pack in nearly as many words as a Victorian novel. Here are the terms and claims you're most likely to see.

■ **Antibiotic-free:** This is a meaningless claim — you can expect all eggs to be 'antibiotic-free'. If antibiotics are used it's only under veterinary supervision; they probably don't get into the eggs and in any case there's a withdrawal period before eggs can be collected.

■ **No hormones:** Eggs don't contain added hormones, so this is another meaningless claim. In the remote past, cockerels were raised for meat as capons by adding hormones to their diet, but this practice was banned in the 1950s.

■ **No preservatives:** Yet another meaningless claim. All eggs have their own natural built-in preservatives. There are antibacterial proteins in the white that help to prevent bacteria invading the egg from the outer surface of the shell. This is why you don't often find a bad egg. (Only one of the more than 300 eggs we tested was actually bad.)

If the shell is cracked or broken, though, bacteria can get through in overwhelming numbers, so it's safest to toss out any cracked or broken eggs. It's always worth checking inside the box

before putting it in your supermarket trolley. (And we even found two boxes with only 11 eggs instead of the dozen!)

■ **Omega-3 enriched:** These eggs come from hens that are fed a special diet containing a higher proportion of omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin E, producing eggs with a higher omega-3 fat content. Omega-3 fats are good for the heart and can also lower blood pressure. One serve (two eggs) of **CHANTECLAIR FARMS The Body Egg** and **ESSENTIAL FOODS Sports Plus** and **Nurture Plus** provides about 800 mg — a significant proportion of the recommended daily intake (2000 mg/day). Other brands also claim to be omega-3 enriched, but they have only about half (or less) of this amount.

■ **Organic:** 'Organic' eggs come from farms that must first qualify for free-range status. The system is also supposed to be free from pesticides, chemical fertilisers and antibiotics, and the birds are fed organically grown grain.

■ **Vegetarian:** These eggs come from hens that are fed a diet with no meat or fish ingredients. Usually the eggs come from caged birds — free-range hens can't produce 'vegetarian' eggs as there's no way to control what they find or pull out of the ground to eat.

■ **Vitamin-enriched:** A number of egg boxes make claims about 'enriching' or 'boosting' with vitamins. But if you eat a balanced diet you don't need these extra vitamins. It's just a sales gimmick.

IT'S A CHOOK'S LIFE

■ Eggs labelled as 'cage' (or just as 'eggs') come from hens kept in small wire cages holding up to five birds. Cages have a minimum height of 40 cm (just high enough for the hens to stand up) and each bird has a minimum floor space of about 500–550 square centimetres (about the size of a page of CHOICE).

Hens in cages also have their beaks trimmed. This is routine practice — if it's not done the birds often attack each other and weaker ones can be killed (and even eaten) by their cage mates.

Many people condemn the cage system as cruel and nearly 20% of eggs are now produced by free-range or barn chickens.

■ **Barn-laid** eggs come from chickens housed in large barns, divided into pens, each containing up to 1000 birds. They have the freedom to spread their wings, stretch and socialise, as well as dust-bathe, perch and scratch for food. Limited beak trimming is carried out to prevent cannibalism. Barn-laid egg producers are generally accredited by the RSPCA, which endorses this system as a more humane alternative to the cage system.

■ **Free-range** eggs come from hens that are free to move over an area of open ground during the day. The RSPCA has only endorsed one free-range farm to date (on Kangaroo Island) because of concerns about the vulnerability of birds to weather and attack from predators. Other animal welfare groups, however, don't share this concern.

QUALITY / FRESHNESS

Brand

CAGE

Brand	1 Fail rate (%)	2 Haugh units range	Number of boxes tested	City where bought	3 Price per dozen (\$)
GOLDEN EGGS	0	66–71	1	Adel	4.05
HOME BRAND (Woolworths)	30	42–84	3	Adel, Bris, Syd	2.45
CHANTECLAIR FARMS The Body Egg	40	32–84	2	Syd	4.40
WOOLWORTHS	50	23–83	3	Adel, Bris, Syd	3.10
ESSENTIAL FOODS Nurture Plus	60	47–66	1	Syd	4.60
THE GOOD EGG	60	58–67	1	Adel	4.10
COLES FARMLAND	70	15–80	3	Adel, Bris, Syd	3.10
COLES SAVINGS	70	32–75	3	Adel, Bris, Syd	2.30
SUNNY QUEEN FARMS	70	6–88	2	Bris	3.65
PACE FARM	80	15–66	3	Adel, Syd	3.80
VEGGS For Families	90	4–68	3	Bris, Syd	4.60
ESSENTIAL FOODS Sports Plus	100	20–48	1	Syd	4.70
NEWSTART	100	49–57	1	Syd	5.00 (A)
VEGGS	100	21–43	1	Bris	4.45

BARN-LAID

COLES	30	34–82	3	Adel, Bris, Syd	4.80
SUNNY QUEEN FARMS Freedom	30	23–76	2	Bris	5.10
GOLDEN EGGS	50	45–75	2	Adel	5.00
PACE FARM Liberty	50	34–86	3	Adel, Syd	4.80
WOOLWORTHS	50	45–80	3	Adel, Bris, Syd	4.65

FREE-RANGE

GOLDEN EGGS Angle Vale	0	68–79	1	Adel	5.00
MANNING VALLEY	20	49–74	1	Syd	4.75
PACE FARM Eco	20	51–79	3	Adel, Syd	6.80
COLES	30	48–76	2	Adel, Bris	5.15
ECOEKGS	40	43–85	2	Syd	7.05 (B)
VALLEY BROOK	50	42–75	2	Adel, Syd	4.90
CHANTECLAIR FARMS	60	22–88	2	Adel, Syd	4.95
ESSENTIAL FOODS Gourmet	60	44–73	1	Syd	4.75
PACE FARM Natural Living	60	29–91	3	Adel, Syd	4.85
SUNNY QUEEN FARMS	60	49–73	2	Bris	5.35
WOOLWORTHS	60	13–66	1	Syd	4.70

(A) Calculated from the price of a box of six.

(B) Calculated from the price of a box of 10.

1 Fail rate

The percentage, rounded to the nearest 10%, of all the tested eggs of that brand and production method with Haugh unit values below 60. (See *Eggs cracked open*, page 18, for more on Haugh values.)

2 Haugh units range

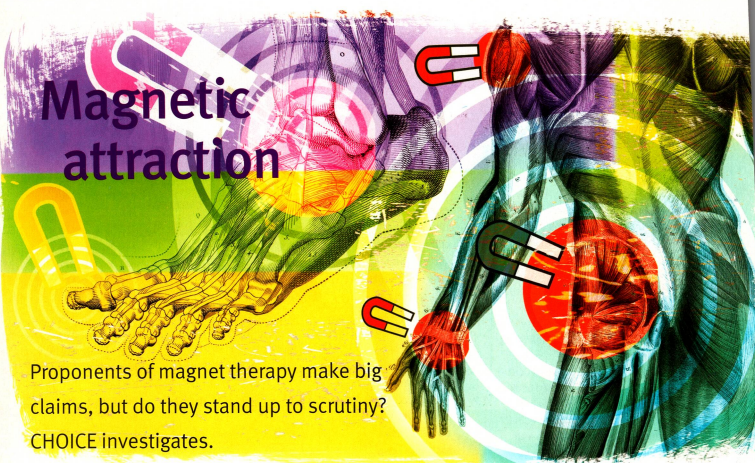
The overall range of Haugh values found for all the tested eggs of that brand and production method.

3 Price per dozen

Prices varied with store and location. This is the average of the prices we paid rounded to the nearest five cents.



Magnetic attraction



Proponents of magnet therapy make big claims, but do they stand up to scrutiny?

CHOICE investigates.

IN A NUTSHELL

- We couldn't find any conclusive scientific evidence to support magnet therapy.
- Despite this, some people are certain it's relieved some of the pain associated with their particular condition.
- There's no evidence it's harmful either, except maybe to your hip pocket.

Chronic pain is a hidden epidemic that affects at least one in 10 Australians. It's not well understood, is often debilitating and can lead to depression, isolation and unemployment. Unsurprisingly, if you suffer from it you'll do almost anything to make it go away. Which brings us to magnets and magnet therapy.

WHAT ARE THE CLAIMS?

Magnet therapy uses static magnets — essentially the same as fridge magnets, for example, only more powerful — which are placed over painful areas of the body. If some of the claims are to be believed, the therapy offers a cure nothing short of miraculous. One Australian company claims an astonishing 96% success rate for the 'relief of pain'. Others furnish glowing testimonials — "I have rheumatoid arthritis and have had constant pain in my hands. Now wearing the bracelets, I have NO PAIN!" — and endorsements from sports and TV stars as to their effectiveness.

The products available include magnetic bracelets and necklaces; magnetic underlays; magnetic supports for the back, wrist, knee and ankle; and stick-on magnets for handy placement anywhere on your body. None of these is to be confused with magnets used with an electric current or electromagnetic field, which is a different type of therapy (see *Electromagnetic therapy*, page 24).

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE?

The big question is, do magnets really work? The answer is complicated because the more you look, the less everyone seems to know. There are some limited studies on static magnet therapy — including some that were double-blind (a highly respected method where neither patients nor researchers know who is using the trial therapy vs a placebo) — but the results are equivocal: for every positive result there's a negative study that shows nothing.

The first study to cause a real stir was done at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, in 1997. Participants were 50 patients suffering from post-polio syndrome who had been experiencing pain for at least a month. (This is a condition that can afflict adults who had polio as children; it manifests itself as muscular and arthritic pain and muscle weakness.)

The researchers asked them to rate their current rate of pain on a scale of one to 10. They then taped magnets (or placebos) for 45 minutes to the area where pain was triggered. The patients then rated their pain again on the 10-point scale.

The results were clear: of the 29 patients who had a magnet attached, 22 experienced an improvement in their pain levels, compared with just four out of the 21 who had the placebos. On average, the magnet patients experienced a 54% reduction in pain, compared to 12% for the placebo group.



This study has since been faulted — there was a disproportionate number of women in the trial group and the strength of the force exerted by the devices wasn't measured exactly — but it was the first to make the medical community think there might be something to magnets.

Another positive result came from the University of Virginia in 2001, where magnets were trialed as a treatment for the pain associated with fibromyalgia, a rheumatological syndrome associated with widespread pain, fatigue, fitful sleep, depression and anxiety, for which there are few effective treatments.

Two different magnetic underblankets (or placebos) were trialed by two groups of patients for six months. The results seemed to show that those using a 'functional magnetic underlay' (which provided whole-body exposure to a uniform magnetic field) had the greatest pain reduction, and researchers noted the effects were most likely cumulative. However, the results for each group weren't different enough to be statistically significant.

Since then there have been a couple of other studies showing positive effects, including one this year — a small pilot study at the Harvard Medical School in Boston, which found that after four hours, magnets were effective (compared to placebos) at reducing the pain of osteoarthritis in the knee.

On the negative front, a study at the Veterans' Affairs Medical Centre in Prescott, Arizona, in 2000 used magnets to treat chronic low-back pain by placing magnets (or placebos) on the affected area for six hours a day, three days a week for one week. It found they had no effect.

Nor did magnets make any difference in a study in 1997 as a treatment for plantar heel pain, when they were placed in moulded shoe insoles for four weeks. The group with magnetic insoles showed no greater improvement than the group with regular insoles.

A third study in 2002 at the Oklahoma College of Medicine, using magnetic disks (or placebos) strapped to the wrists for 45 minutes as a treatment for the pain associated with carpal tunnel syndrome, found no significant difference in effect between the magnets and the placebos. But the placebo group and the magnet group both reported an overall improvement in pain levels, indicating that the placebo effect was alive and well (see *The placebo effect*, page 24).

Overall there doesn't appear to be a trend one way or the other, nor can the studies be easily compared. Some looked for an effect in a short space of time, while others involved weeks of use. Each used a different product and different-strength magnet. Each treated the pain associated with a different condition. The groups weren't always gender-balanced (which is particularly important when studying pain and complementary medical treatments). As far as we can tell, none of these studies appears to have been replicated, nor is there a large enough body of scientific study to rule out the placebo effect.

WHAT ABOUT THE PRODUCTS?

When you're dealing with the science, then, there simply isn't enough research to be definite. However, some good news out of all this is that so far nothing suggests magnet therapy is harmful.

With the products themselves, few have been subject to laboratory evaluation and there's no universal system of quality control. The Hong Kong Consumer Council tested 18 products simply to see if the actual magnet strength (measured in gauss) was the same as that claimed on the package. It found that only half stated a strength in gauss and only two of the claimed strengths were close to the test results. In addition, a magnet's strength is greatest at its surface — particularly an issue with products like magnetic underlays where the magnet doesn't touch the skin.

WHAT DO USERS SAY?

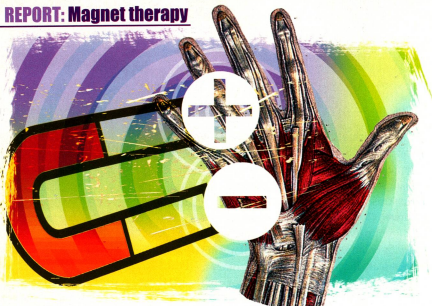
Lab studies are a large part of the story, but user reports are also useful. When CHOICE surveyed almost 5000 subscribers in September 2001 about their use and the perceived effectiveness of alternative therapies, magnet therapy was rated the least helpful of all treatments for headaches and neck or back pain, and second-worst for osteoarthritis.

What are the theories?

Some of the claims about how magnet therapy might work centre around ideas that magnets:

- Improve the circulation of blood, thereby speeding healing.
- Alter the body's energy flows.
- Alter the flow of ions in the body and interact with pain signals to the brain.

Many scientists and medical experts dispute these claims, and further scientific study is necessary.



JUSTIFYING CLAIMS

We should see less dramatic claims for magnet therapy and other health-related products later this year when changes to the Therapeutic Goods Act come into effect. These changes mean that if a company claims a product provides a medical benefit, it'll have to provide clinical evidence for the claim.

This should mean better regulation of therapeutic goods sold in Australia. Although it's an improvement, the Therapeutic Goods Administration will have to play a strong role in policing these claims to ensure adequate protection for consumers. It can't, however, stop the flood of claims of products sold on the internet from overseas.

In a similar survey conducted by CHOICE's sister magazine in the US, *Consumer Reports*, magnetic therapy ranked last out of 14 treatments for arthritis and second-to-last as a treatment for back pain.

Neither of these surveys is anything like a clinical trial — respondents were reporting on a range of magnetic products with different-strength magnets and for different conditions — but they do suggest that other alternative therapies could be more effective at treating chronic pain.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

The difficult thing about pain is that it's unique for everyone. It affects individuals differently and the same can be true of treatments — what works for some doesn't work for others.

Exercise, using weights, yoga, social support, relaxation massage, osteopathy, hydrotherapy, physiotherapy and naturopathy are just some treatments that have demonstrated benefits for different pain conditions. Your doctor can also recommend several classes of drug that are available over-the-counter or by prescription that can relieve chronic pain. Whatever you try, make

Electromagnetic therapy

Don't confuse static magnet therapy with other magnet treatments that involve electrical fields — and which have been shown to be effective.

■ Pulsed electromagnetic therapy (PEMT) induces small voltages in the body via a mild pulsed electromagnetic field. It's been clinically demonstrated to be an effective treatment to aid bone healing.

There's also evidence that PEMT may be useful for treating chronic conditions ranging from joint disease to venous ulcers, tendonitis, oostoarthritis, MS fatigue, soft tissue injury and sports injuries.

■ Transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) generates an electric current near the scalp and is showing promising results for treating depression.

Be particularly cautious of static magnet products that make claims that seem to be based on research into PEMT or TMS: they're very different treatments and analogies shouldn't be drawn between them.

sure you keep talking to your doctor about what you're using and what is and isn't working.

Finally, because we all have a poor memory for our own pain levels, one great tip if you're trying any new treatment is to make yourself the subject of your own medical study. Keep a daily diary for a week or two before you start the new treatment and record your pain level (on a scale of 1–10), when it occurs and what might be triggering it. Keep the diary going for at least a couple of weeks after you start the treatment. Then assess for yourself whether it's really working.

THE CHOICE BOTTOM LINE

Scientifically the results are too inconclusive to be able to make big claims for magnet therapy. On the other hand, there's no doubt some people do report experiencing pain relief when they use it.

Based on the evidence so far, CHOICE would recommend giving static magnet therapy a miss. If you're not getting help from conventional treatments, consider trying alternative therapies with more hard evidence behind them (see above).

If you still want to give it a try, protect the hip pocket area of your anatomy: try to buy a product with a money-back trial period, and don't buy the most expensive in the range first.

Whatever therapy you decide to try, keep a pain diary to give you a good reference point to see what's really working.

THE PLACEBO EFFECT

It's wrong to think chronic pain is all in the mind — it isn't — but any treatment of it is strongly affected by the placebo effect. This means a person's belief that a treatment will work influences the outcome, no matter whether the treatment is effective in itself or not.

The placebo effect has been observed for pills, injections and, most startling of all, surgery. In one study, doctors performed arthroscopic knee surgery under anaesthetic as a treatment for arthritis pain on five patients, and just made incisions under anaesthetic that looked like surgery on another five. All 10 men reported less pain after six months.

Medical experts conservatively estimate that around 30% of patients getting placebo treatments improve. Researchers also know that pain is affected by your mood (you feel pain less if you're happy) and your environment.

How to get better value

Save \$\$\$ with our Best Buys.

Did you get an increase in your health insurance premium in the mail earlier this year? If so, you're not alone: health fund premiums were increased for the third year in a row, this time by an average of 7.6%. Over the same period some funds have been cutting benefits and eroding the value of your cover.

So it's the right time to use our Best Buys and see if you can save on your premium.

WHY GO PRIVATE?

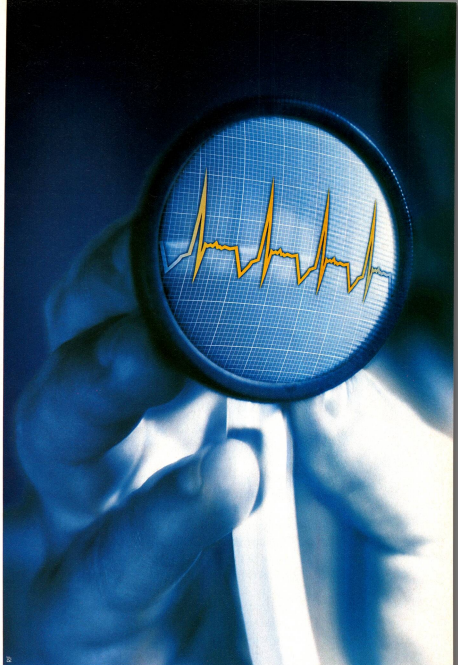
The Federal Government has introduced a range of incentives that have pushed the proportion of the population covered by private health insurance to over 40%. The most important incentives are:

- **30% rebate:** A discount on hospital and extras premiums financed by the government, currently costing the taxpayer about \$2.5 billion per year.
- **Medicare levy surcharge:** Single people earning more than \$50,000 and couples/families more than \$100,000 (plus \$1500 for each child after the first) who don't have hospital insurance pay a 1% Medicare surcharge — on top of the 1.5% Medicare levy most people pay. That's an extra \$500 or \$1000 or more per year. If you have to pay the surcharge you can often be better off taking out hospital insurance instead — you can get a policy (usually with a high excess and/or limited benefits) for less than that.
- **Lifetime health cover:** This is a surcharge for people who take up hospital insurance later in life. A 2% surcharge applies for every year you're over 30 and not a member, up to 70%. For example, if

you join at 31 you'll pay 2% extra on your hospital insurance premium; at 50 you'll pay 40% extra.

Other reasons for going private are:

- **'Lifestyle' reasons:** You're more likely to be able to choose your doctor in hospital; shorter waiting times for elective surgery (for non life-threatening conditions); access to private hospitals — which may be more comfortable, but there's no evidence they provide better treatment.
- **Concerns about the public system:** More than three quarters of respondents to an online survey run by CHOICE Money & Rights think they won't be able to rely on the public system in the future. This is despite 85% believing health cover should be provided on the basis of need, not the ability to pay, and 49% thinking government resources should be spent on increasing bulk billing rather than subsidising private health insurance (only 27% disagreed).



IN A NUTSHELL

■ **We've surveyed 141** hospital insurance policies with about 1600 pricing options to come up with Best Buys — good policies that could substantially cut your premiums.

■ **For an in-depth article,** including a bigger range of Best Buy options, see CHOICE Money & Rights, August/September 2004. To subscribe call 1800 069 552. Subscribers to CHOICE Money & Rights also have free access to an online 'compare-a-policy' tool.

BEST BUYS: STANDARD-COVER FAMILY POLICIES WITH A CO-PAYMENT OR EXCESS UP TO \$500 IN TOTAL PER YEAR AND A SCORE OF 80% OR HIGHER

			Premiums (\$, annual family premium after the 30% rebate)						
Fund (in score order)	Policy	Score (%)	ACT / NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
OPEN FUNDS									
HCF	Top Plus \$50*4; \$400 max co-payment	91					1594	1649	
HEALTH PARTNERS	Excess 25; \$500 max co-payment	86			1595	1595	1595	1595	
NRMA / SGIC	Hospital Value; \$500 excess	85			1558	1543			
MBF	Advantage Hospital; \$500 excess	84	1382	874	1499	1442		1605	1129
NIB	Top Private Hospital; \$400 excess (A)	81	1464				1482		
CLOSED FUNDS									
TEACHERS FEDERATION	Top Private Hospital; \$0 excess	98	1310		1310	1310	1092	1383	1092
CBHS	Hospital 'a'; \$0 excess	97	1383		1540	1460	1500	1609	
R&T HEALTH	Top Private Hospital; \$0 excess	96			1536	1536	1536	1536	
LYSAGHT PEOPLECARE	Private; \$500 excess	92	1394		1394	1394	1394	1394	
NAVY HEALTH	Saver 2; \$500 excess	84	1270		1270	1270	1270	1270	

(A) Rehabilitation and psychiatric benefits limited to 30 days for day only, 65 days for overnight. Benefits for a private patient in a public hospital will then apply.

HOW TO SAVE

If you don't think you'll need to use your insurance in the near future and are happy to pay part of the cost yourself if you do need to go to hospital, you can save money by agreeing to pay an excess or a co-payment in return for a lower premium.

An **excess** is paid for one hospital stay, a **co-payment** per day in hospital. An excess usually has a maximum limit, but some funds apply it a number of times in one year, others only once — so check. And many funds place no yearly maximum limit on co-payments, so you'd have to pay it every time one of your family went to hospital: check that too. Also check whether they apply in public and day hospitals when you're a private patient.

■ **Tip:** To decide whether an excess or co-payment is right for you, look at how much cheaper the policy becomes. The discount may be so high that after one or two years you'll have saved the extra payment you would have to make if you did go to hospital.

■ **Trap:** If you want a hospital policy to avoid having to pay the Medicare levy surcharge (see page 25) your excess can't be more than \$1000 (family) or \$500 for singles.

■ **Trap:** Even though the premium may be cheaper, be cautious when changing funds: you may have to serve waiting times and benefit limitation periods. The latter can apply for up to 36 months on procedures such as heart surgery, joint replacements and obstetrics. During this time you're only covered as a private patient in a public hospital, usually only for a shared room, so you can't use the cover to avoid the public waiting list by going to a private hospital without being up for large out-of-pocket costs.

Our **Best Buys** (see the table, above) are family policies with a co-payment or excess up to \$500

in total per year, and a score of 80% or higher. They're on average \$310 cheaper than the most expensive policies in this category.

For a range of four different levels of Best Buys, including top cover with no excess/co-payment, budget cover with a \$1000 total excess or co-payment, and the cheapest policies available, see *CHOICE Money & Rights*, August/September. To subscribe call 1800 069 552. ■

Share the costs, share the

There are more and more signs private health insurance is, once again, in trouble. Premiums are increasing at the same rates as before the introduction of the 30% rebate and lifetime cover.

The age profile of members is also returning to the same pattern as before those initiatives. Since the high point of September 2000, around 365,900 people under 55 have left private insurance. In the over-55 age group, around 284,300 people have joined — despite the penalties for late joining.

Generally speaking, before age 55, members are contributors — their premiums exceed the amount they receive in benefits. After 55 they're beneficiaries — the benefits they receive exceed premiums paid.

The funds need young people to join and stay if they're to remain viable. But young people are less likely to see a value in membership, particularly with premiums increasing. Fund membership and premium increases can be a vicious cycle. As premiums increase young people leave; funds have fewer resources to subsidise expensive members, so premiums increase, thus starting the whole process again.

CHECK WITH YOUR FUND

To avoid unexpected bills from a hospital, make sure your policy doesn't only cover you as a private patient in a public hospital, and that your fund has an agreement with the hospital before you're admitted. The cost of admission to a hospital that's not fully covered by your fund can be very high — consumers regularly lodge complaints with the ombudsman after receiving unexpected accounts for several thousand dollars. Accounts for \$10,000 or more aren't unheard of.

How we scored

We included open and restricted-membership ('closed') funds with over 10,000 members in our analysis. If you're eligible to join a closed fund (see *Contacts*, below right) check out its policies and premiums, as they scored well against the open funds and in many cases cost hundreds of dollars less.

Some funds didn't give us their information:

CREDICARE, GRAND UNITED, HEALTHGUARD, HIF, MANCHESTER UNITY, MILDURA DISTRICT HOSPITAL FUND, TEACHERS UNION HEALTH (Qld) and WESTFUND.

NIB and **HBF** also declined, but because of their large market share we conducted our own research and included them. **NIB** checked the information but **HBF** declined to do so.

Premiums are rounded to the nearest dollar and are for a family paying annually by direct debit after the 30% rebate. Single premiums are usually half the family premium; couples and single parents pay the same as families in most funds.

The policy score includes:

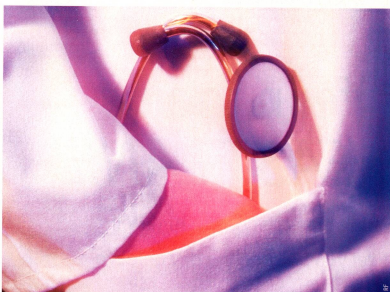
- Cover available in general and for 10 common procedures, including exclusions and limitations and the length of the waiting period.
- How often and where co-payments or excesses apply.
- Gap cover (the difference between the amount your doctor or the hospital charges and what's covered by Medicare and your fund).

fits

The government currently spends \$2.5 billion per year on the 30% rebate, and increasing premiums make it more expensive every year. This cost means restoring bulk billing, dental care, mental health and Aboriginal health go without adequate funding.

It's not that individual consumers don't benefit from the rebate — many do through cheaper premiums — but the health system should meet the needs of all consumers, not just those who can afford insurance. The most cost-effective health systems are those where costs are shared by the whole community — universal health systems. Australians have said time and again they want access to healthcare based on need rather than ability to pay (see *Why go private?*, page 25).

Some time in the next five years cost pressures will force the government (whichever party is in power) to review its private health insurance policies. Rather than another knee-jerk response to prop up health insurance, the government needs to engage in a conversation with the Australian community to rediscover what sort of health system we want and to work out the best way to fund it.



Contacts

OPEN FUNDS

- **AUSTRALIAN UNITY:** 13 29 39, www.australianunity.com.au.
- **GMHBA:** 1300 136 652, www.gmhba.com.au.
- **GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES (AUSTRALIAN HEALTH MANAGEMENT):** 1300 656 515, www.gehf.com.au.
- **HBA (BUPA Australia):** 13 12 43, www.hba.com.au.
- **HBF:** 13 34 23, www.hbf.com.au.
- **HCF:** 13 14 39, www.hcf.com.au.
- **HEALTH PARTNERS:** (08) 8223 7588 or 1800 182 322, www.healthpartners.com.au.
- **LATROBE HEALTH SERVICES:** 1300 362 144/155, www.latrobehealth.com.au.
- **MBF:** 13 26 23 new members, 13 11 37 existing members, www.mbf.com.au.
- **MEDIBANK PRIVATE:** 13 23 31, www.medibank.com.au.
- **MUTUAL COMMUNITY (BUPA Australia):** 13 12 43, or in the NT 8946 2222, www.mutualcommunity.com.au.
- **NIB:** 13 14 63, www.nib.com.au.
- **NRMA HEALTH:** 13 21 32, www.nrma.com.au.
- **SGIC HEALTH:** 13 32 33, www.sgic.com.au.
- **SGIO HEALTH:** 13 32 34, www.sgio.com.au.
- **ST LUKES:** 1300 651 988, www.stlukes.com.au.

CLOSED FUNDS

Closed funds are generally open to employees and ex-employees (usually including their families). For further details check with the funds.

- **CBHS:** Commonwealth Bank of Australia and associated entities, 1300 654 123, www.cbhs.com.au.
- **DEFENCE HEALTH:** Permanent and reserve ADF personnel and the Department of Defence and its contractors, 1800 335 425, www.defencehealth.com.au.
- **NAVY HEALTH:** Defence force personnel, reserve members, Department of Defence and some contractors, (03) 9896 9300 or 1300 306 289, www.navyhealth.com.au.
- **LYSAGHT PEOPLECARE:** BHP Billiton and Bluescope Steel groups and associated/successor companies, 1800 808 690, www.peoplecare.com.au.
- **R&T HEALTH:** Railway and transport companies, 1300 886 123, www.rthealthfund.com.au.
- **TEACHERS FEDERATION HEALTH:** Education union members, 1300 728 188, www.teachershealth.com.au.

Life in the FAST LANE

Eating breakfast on the run? Will it get you through the day or leave you flagging?

IN A NUTSHELL

■ There's no shortage of options for breakfast on the run — but none is as good for you as sitting down to a bowl of high-fibre cereal with milk.

■ For those frantic mornings when you've really no option but to grab 'n' go, breakfast bars are OK, but grab a piece of fruit as well.

■ Breakfast drinks are nothing like cereal for fibre content and also have too much sugar.

It's important to eat breakfast. If you don't you'll be hungry mid-morning — and those cream doughnuts loaded with sugar and saturated fat will be even more tempting.

Studies consistently show that if you eat breakfast you're less likely to become overweight, and if you eat wholegrain cereals for breakfast you're less likely to die from heart disease. Other studies suggest that children who skip breakfast tend to be fatter than those who don't, and there's some evidence that eating breakfast improves kids' learning ability.

But according to our recent online poll, 34% of CHOICE Onliners eat breakfast on the run or skip it altogether. Other surveys show that children under 10 and adults over 65 are more likely to sit down to breakfast than any other age group. The rest of us are often just too busy.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD BREAKFAST?

The best breakfast choices have plenty of quality **carbohydrate** (the kind you get in whole grains that have plenty of fibre and other nutrients). That's why sitting down to a plate of porridge or a bowl of wholegrain cereal is a good way to start the day.

Fibre is particularly important. As adults we're advised to eat about 30 g a day, and most of us don't eat nearly enough. So breakfast is a good opportunity to get ahead with our daily fibre intake with a bowl of cereal. That's why we've ranked quick breakfast options by their fibre content in the table on page 30.

Breakfast is also a good opportunity to get ahead on **low-fat** eating. We shouldn't be getting more than about 30% of our energy from fat all up, and it's easier to avoid fat at breakfast than at any other meal. Another thing you don't want a lot of for

breakfast is **sugar** (unless you're an athlete and will burn it off during exercise). Sugar provides kilojoules for energy but no other nutritional benefits.

When we last looked at breakfast cereals (CHOICE, May 2003) we found **SANITARIUM Weet-Bix** had plenty of fibre and not too much fat, sugar or salt. So we've compared the breakfast bars, breakfast drinks and other options with two **Weet-Bix** served with half a cup (125 mL) of reduced-fat milk and a teaspoon (5 g) of sugar.

CALLED TO THE BAR ...

"If you're in a rush save the cutlery and the china — grab a 'bowl in a bar' and enjoy!" ... "The convenient and nutritious way to start your day" ... Breakfast bars and breakfast drinks are promoted as a nutritious substitute for a sit-down breakfast. How do they really compare?

Breakfast bars have flakes of cereal — wheatflakes, cornflakes, rolled oats — stuck together with sugar. They also often contain dried fruit, and some have nuts. This sounds good, but most of the bars in the

SHARON GRAYSON

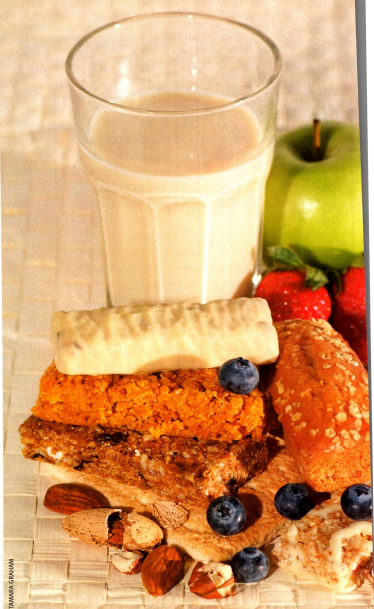




table provide less fibre and more added sugar than a serve of Weet-Bix, milk and sugar. The exceptions are **ORGANIC Crunchola Apple Blueberry** and **Apple Cinnamon** bars, and **CARMAN's Classic Fruit and Original Muesli**. The two **CARMAN's** breakfast bars unfortunately have more fat than is ideal (they have added canola oil) — see the table for details.

Many breakfast cereals are fortified with vitamins and minerals, including folate and iron, and help you get your daily requirement of these nutrients. Many breakfast bars aren't fortified, so bear that in mind if you often eat them instead of cereal.

You may also miss out on the calcium you'd get from cereal eaten with milk. Calcium is one of the few nutrients that many Australians (particularly teenage girls) don't get enough of — it's vital for growth and maintenance of healthy teeth and bones.

All things considered, though, breakfast bars are a reasonable option if you have to rush out of the house without breakfast.

They're a bit light on energy and you'll probably feel hungry again by mid-morning, so grabbing a piece of fruit at the same time (or later as a snack) will help to fill the corners and boost your vitamin intake, while washing it down with milk will provide some extra calcium.

... OR A LIQUID BREAKFAST?

Breakfast drinks are more different from the real thing. Although their labelling makes them appear to have plenty of fibre, this is different from the fibre provided by wholegrain cereals (see *Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast*, right).

They also have more sugar than breakfast bars, and more salt than most of them, but their redeeming feature is their calcium content. All the ones we looked at have twice as much calcium per serve as any of the breakfast bars — they even have more than our bowl of Weet-Bix and milk. On balance, though, we don't think they're as good a substitute for a sit-down breakfast as breakfast bars.

MORE GRAB'N'GO OPTIONS

What other options are there for breakfast on the run?

■ **Muesli bars.** You'll find these in the snack foods aisle at the supermarket, whereas breakfast bars are with the breakfast cereals. Other than that, the difference between the two isn't immediately obvious, so we included some of the top-selling muesli bars in the table for comparison. However, on average they seem to have less fibre and even more sugar than breakfast bars.

■ **Yoghurt. THE HOUSE OF WINTON Light Bircher Muesli** is a mixture of muesli and yoghurt, and delivers more fibre than most breakfast bars without too much fat, sugar or salt, so nutritionally it's a good option. It's from the chiller cabinet in the supermarket and you have to keep it refrigerated and have an eye to its shelf-life.

However, ordinary **low-fat yoghurt** (either fruit or natural) with a **piece of fruit** is another good grab'n'go option. The yoghurt alone has little or no fibre, but eaten with an apple or a banana it delivers as much fibre as other breakfasts plus the calcium and other nutrients from the yoghurt.

■ **Pop-tarts.** While not exactly grab'n'go because you have to put them in the toaster for a couple of minutes, pop-tarts are certainly quick and easy to prepare. But they don't have much fibre, contain more sugar and sodium than breakfast bars and lack a lot of vitamins and minerals: not a good breakfast option.

Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast ...

... As the White Queen said in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. And some breakfast-substitute manufacturers would have us do something similar with their interpretation of 'fibre'.

SANITARIUM Up & Go Liquid Breakfast claims that it has "the goodness and fibre of two Weet-Bix and milk". But a quick look at the ingredient lists shows they're nothing like the same. The fibre in **Up & Go** comes from chicory inulin and the starch from a special strain of maize.

And **UNCLE TOBYS Breakfast on the Go** claims to have "as much fibre as a serving of Uncle Tobys oats!" It does have some oat bran (less than 1.5%) but again, much of the fibre is inulin, which isn't the same as oats.

Nutritionists now have very strong evidence that the insoluble fibre in wheat and other whole grains is good for your bowels, and the soluble fibre in oats good for your heart. Inulin counts as 'dietary fibre' under the Food Standards Code, but in fact it's nothing like the fibre in wheat bran or oats — and it hasn't been as thoroughly researched. Although inulin is like soluble fibre in some respects, as yet there's no clear evidence that it's good for the heart or has a role in the prevention of bowel cancer.

And it might not be just the fibre that's important. Research has shown that wholegrain cereals in themselves cut down your risk of developing heart disease and other health problems.

Breakfast (in order of fibre within groups)	1 Nutrients per serve					2 Energy from fat (%)	Serve size (g or mL)*	Price per serve (\$)***
	Fibre (g)	Energy (kJ)	Sugars (g)	Calcium (mg)	Sodium (mg)			
Two Sanitarium Weet-Bix with 125 mL reduced-fat milk and one teaspoon (5 g) of sugar	3.2	755	12.7 (F)	185	84	13	164	0.32
BREAKFAST BARS								
NORGANIC Crunchola Apple Blueberry	5.1	595	6.3	ns	19	25	35	0.67
CARMAN'S Classic Fruit	4.4 (C)	763	8.3	ns	17	34	45	0.60
NORGANIC Crunchola Apple Cinnamon	4.2	606	4.9	ns	13	24	35	0.67
CARMAN'S Original Muesli Breakfast Bars	3.5 (C)	789	5.3	ns	17	38	45	0.60
UNCLE TOBYS Breakfast on the Go Fruit and Nut	1.8	570	8.5	200	90	19	37	0.49
UNCLE TOBYS Breakfast on the Go Honey Nut Cornflakes	1.7	600	7.0	200	145	16	37	0.49
HILLCREST Balanced Right Apricot	1.6	503	9.1	ns	10	4	33	0.42
HILLCREST Balanced Right Golden Flakes with Apricot	1.6	527	11.0	ns	106	7	33	0.42
HILLCREST Balanced Right Grains Delight	1.6	494	9.1	ns	10	5	33	0.42
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Bars Apricot	1.5	440	8.2	80	46	23	25	0.41
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Bars Strawberry	1.5	440	8.2	80	46	23	25	0.41
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Bars Wild Berry	1.5	440	8.2	80	46	23	25	0.41
KELLOGG'S Special K Bars Original Flavour	0.6	433	8.7	ns	62	4	28	0.70
KELLOGG'S LCMs Corn Flakes Honey (A)	0.4	353	5.7	ns	105	10	22	0.41
KELLOGG'S LCMs Cereal and Milk Bars (A)	0.3	352	7.9	ns	49	24	20	0.61
KELLOGG'S LCMs Rice Bubbles (A)	0.2	379	6.6	ns	81	20	22	0.41
BREAKFAST DRINKS								
UNCLE TOBYS Breakfast on the Go Chocolate Smoothie	5.4 (D)	940	28.0	400	135	17	285	1.16
UNCLE TOBYS Breakfast on the Go Strawberry Smoothie	4.6 (D)	910	29.0	400	285	18	285	1.16
UNCLE TOBYS Breakfast on the Go Mango Smoothie	4.3 (D)	880	29.0	400	180	18	285	1.16
SANITARIUM Up & Go Liquid Breakfast Banana	3.8 (D)	850	19.0	400	188	17	250	1.33
SANITARIUM Up & Go Liquid Breakfast Choc Ice	3.8 (D)	850	19.0	400	188	17	250	1.33
SANITARIUM Up & Go Liquid Breakfast Strawberry	3.8 (D)	850	19.0	400	188	17	250	1.33
SANITARIUM Up & Go Liquid Breakfast Vanilla Ice	3.8 (D)	850	19.0	400	188	17	250	1.33
SANITARIUM Fast Break Breakfast Smoothie Wildberry	3.0 (D)	725	19.0	400	225	13	250	1.33
YOGHURT (B)								
THE HOUSE OF WINSTON Light Bircher Muesli with Forest Berries	4.1	992	19.0	130 (C)	52	19	185	1.75
Apple and a tub of low-fat fruit yoghurt	3.1	963	44.0	366	124	2	356	2.13
SKI Double Up Crunch Yoghurt with Muesli	1.7 (C) (E)	993 (E)	29.0 (E)	221 (E)	97 (E)	14	165 (E)	1.83 (E)
MUESLI BARS (B)								
UNCLE TOBYS Chewy Apricot	1.9	510	6.7	ns	30	30	31	0.47
MOTHER EARTH Apricot Yoghurt	1.7	550	8.5	ns	28	34	33	0.43
WEIGHT WATCHERS Apricot Pie	1.7	470	9.5	ns	194	3	40	0.52
UNCLE TOBYS Apricot Yoghurt Toppings Muesli Bars	1.4	530	9.6	ns	35	30	31	0.47
KELLOGG'S K-time Muffin Bars Apple	0.5	718	16.0	ns	84	22	45	0.60
COLES FARMLAND Oven Baked Fruit Bars Apricot	ns	483	11.0	ns	118	9	38	0.42
POP-TARTS								
KELLOGG'S Original Apple & Cinnamon Flavour	0.9	824	14.8	ns	190	24	50	0.67
KELLOGG'S Original Double Choc Flavour	0.9	824	15.5	ns	228	22	50	0.67

* Breakfast bars, muesli bars and Pop-tarts in grams, breakfast drinks and yoghurt in millilitres.

** Based on what we paid in June/July 2004.

ns Not stated.

(A) Not specifically marketed as breakfast bars, but we've included them in this category as they're made from particles of breakfast cereal.

(B) A representative sample included for comparison. There are many more brands and varieties available.

(C) Not stated on the label, but the information was supplied by the manufacturer.

(D) Includes inulin, which is different from the fibre in whole grains (see page 29).

(E) According to the label, the serve size is 100 g. But we think you'd eat the entire contents of the tub (365 g) and have calculated the nutrients accordingly.

(F) About 50% of this is lactose from the milk.

1 Nutrients per serve

This is from the nutrition composition panel, unless footnoted.

2 Percentage of energy from fat

One gram of fat delivers 37 kJ, and the nutrition information panels state the fat content (in grams) of each food as well as the kilojoule content; from these we calculated the percentage of energy from fat in each breakfast option. We should get no more than 30% of our energy from fat, so the higher in fat your breakfast is, the more careful you need to be to keep fat content down the rest of the day.

WANT MORE MONEY INFO?

CHOICE *Money & Rights* magazine is published six times a year and contains more information on money topics (and your consumer rights) than we could ever fit into CHOICE. To subscribe call 1800 069 552 toll-free or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.



Have your say on the insurance code

If you'd like to have your say on the new General Insurance Draft Code of Practice, aimed at improving consumer protection in the general insurance industry, you need to get in quickly.

The Insurance Council of Australia (ICA) is calling for public submissions by September 8 this year to assist in developing the final version of the code.

Proposals contained in the draft code include a package to improve claims handling procedures; ways to identify policyholders' needs in times of disaster; and plans to boost consumer education about how insurance works and improve the administration of code compliance.

You can make an online submission at ICA's website, www.ica.com.au, where the draft code and various other supporting materials can be found.



If it sounds too good to be true...

Spruikers promoting direct investment in property, such as buying an investment unit, are generally not covered by the Financial Services Reform Act (FSRA). That means presenters of property investment seminars don't have to:

- Meet training and competency requirements.
- Disclose any conflicts of interest.
- Belong to an approved external dispute resolution scheme.
- Meet the many other requirements of the FSRA.

According to the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC), problems with unregulated property seminar spruikers can include:

- Inflated claims about expected returns and the certainty of those returns.
- Offering high-risk strategies.
- Non-disclosure of commissions, other benefits and interests.
- You might have trouble getting your money back if you're not satisfied with the property seminar training course.
- The high fees charged for some of these courses.
- The widespread use of manipulative and high-pressure selling strategies.

Direct property investment isn't for everyone anyway. Work out your overall investment strategy, and if property is part of it, get advice from a licensed adviser, not unregulated (and often expensive) seminars.

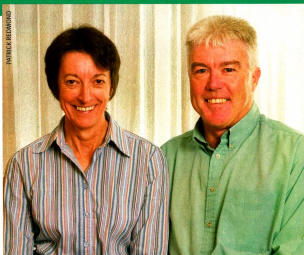
Should you DIY your super?

Twelve months ago Paul and Shirley McColl, like an increasing number of Australians, used their superannuation savings to establish a self-managed super fund (SMSF). They did this to get direct control over their investments and to try to save on fees, having first asked their financial planner for advice.

Currently SMSFs (also known as DIY super) are being established Australia-wide at a rate of 2000-3000 a month; there are already around 300,000 in total. An SMSF is a super fund with up to four members, all of whom are fully involved in the investing, decision-making and running of the fund.

Paul and Shirley already had a share portfolio, a basic understanding of how investing works and a significant amount in an employee super fund, but they know they still have a lot to learn about managing their own super fund as active investors. If it proves too much of a burden, they're prepared to consider handing over their fund's management to their adviser or another professional, or even rolling over into a commercial pension fund.

While DIY super has been promoted by service providers and others in the finance industry, managing your own super is a huge responsibility, and isn't right for everyone.





PHONING HOME

A phone call from your hotel room overseas could cost more than the room itself. So what's cheap and what's convenient, and can you have both?

IN A NUTSHELL

- For a good long chat, it's hard to go past local prepaid phone cards, where you can phone Australia for as little as a few cents a minute.
- Postpaid phone cards that bill your home phone can be a convenient option for you or a family member in many (though not all) countries.
- Using your mobile overseas can be very convenient and doesn't have to cost the earth — with our tips and a little research before you go, you can keep costs down.
- If you're using phone cards or another service that requires dialling a supposedly toll-free number, check for hidden surcharges, like payphone and hotel premiums.

It's not so long ago that the only options for phoning home from overseas were coin-chewing phone boxes, expensive (and perhaps unaccepted) reverse-charge calls, and the even more expensive hotel phone.

These days phone cards — pre- and postpaid — have cornered the budget end of the market, with some offering all sorts of side benefits like voicemail and billing to your home phone. Meanwhile, the convenience of being contactable by mobile has led to many people taking their phones with them.

We look at the options and compare costs for popular international destinations and backpacker/adventure travel hotspots. Unfortunately what's cheap isn't necessarily convenient, and vice versa. But if convenience matters more, we can suggest ways to keep your costs down.

PHONE CARDS

LOCAL PREPAID PHONE CARD

Depending on where you are, you can get phone cards that charge as little as a few cents per minute to call Australia. You simply dial a local or national toll-free access number and follow the voice-prompt instructions.

Some also provide a voicemail service, so people can leave you messages — great when you're on the move but want to remain contactable.

On the downside, line quality and access can vary from company to company, even day-to-day or hour-to-hour. You may find it's impossible to get a line when you need it.

Another disadvantage is you may have to pay a surcharge on top of the regular rate (either flat or per minute) when using a payphone or hotel phone — as many travellers would do. In one such case, a UK phone card charges less than 3 pence per minute for calls to Australia, but an extra 25 p per minute if you're using a payphone — suddenly not so cheap.

Tips:

- If you're going to have to use payphones, check what surcharges you're up for before you buy a particular phone card.
- Hotels also charge premiums, even for 'toll-free' numbers. Find out what you'll be charged before you use it — you might be better off using the public payphone in the lobby.
- If you're calling from outside major population centres, you may have to pay extra to access the service (unless there's a national toll-free number provided).
- Check the expiry — it might be a fixed date, or a period of time after its first use (make a note of the date on the card).
- Mind your language — a traveller told us he bought a card in Spain, and the instructions were all

in Spanish. This was OK because he knew enough to get by, but confronted with the same problem in Japan, had to concede defeat. With many phone cards, however, you're given a choice of languages for instructions.

- Don't spend up big on one card — try a cheap card from the company for a while and make sure you're happy with the service before buying high-value cards.

- Shop around.

OTHER PREPAID PHONE CARDS

Some phone cards can be used in many countries instead of just the one. The rates are relatively cheap, though not always as cheap as a local phone card. The value of the card can be topped up on the go (or by someone back home). Examples include **TELSTRA PhoneAway** card, NobelCom's **NOBEL Worldwide** card and **EKIT** (see the table, page 34).

Advantages include cost control, keeping the same card for all your travels and benefits such as voicemail services. The main disadvantage is you can't use them in all countries — especially if you venture off the beaten track.

Tips:

- Take a list of all the access numbers for each country you're visiting.

POSTPAID PHONE CARDS

TELSTRA Telecard and **OPTUS Calling Card** bill your calls to your home phone. The main advantage over prepaid cards is that you don't have to keep topping them up. However, if you're not careful you might get a nasty shock when you get your bill.

Tips:

- Take a list of all the access numbers for each country you're visiting.

BYO MOBILE PHONE

INTERNATIONAL ROAMING

This is very convenient: you can pretty well use your mobile phone as you would at home, and people can call you as usual. But, as everyone will tell you, it can be very expensive — you not only pay for calls you make, but also for calls that you receive.

The table has examples of the per-minute rates you'll pay for a call to Australia, and also SMS rates. As you can see, prices between countries and between carriers within countries (where there's a choice) range from "Hi, let's chat" to "Hi. I'm fine. Bye."

Contrary to popular belief, local calls that you make on your mobile aren't usually charged like international calls, despite rumours suggesting you're paying for a call from the country you're in, over to Australia and back again to the country you're in — which would indeed make it very expensive. Local call rates in the countries we looked

at are generally quite reasonable, and the cost of receiving calls from Australia is less than calls to Australia. Contact your carrier or check its website for details.

There are some considerations:

- Organise it well in advance — if you don't have automatic access to international roaming, you need to tell your company you'll be using it up to a week before you leave.

- Most prepaid services don't allow international roaming. Some postpaid services may require a security deposit, especially if you're a new customer.

- Your phone handset's bandwidth must be compatible with the systems used in the country/ies you're visiting. In Australia, Europe and many other countries you can use a standard dual-band (900/1800 MHz) handset. In the US and Canada, which operate on a 1900 Mhz frequency, you'll need a tri-band handset (900/1800/1900 Mhz).

In Japan, which operates on a different platform altogether, you may have to rent a phone, which won't be cheap. A better option if you're there for a while may be to buy a phone — we saw one for only \$60.

- At the moment you can't use a CDMA handset for international roaming, and while some negotiations are under way, it won't help in countries that don't have a CDMA network. Your best bet is to buy or borrow a GSM handset and buy a SIM card in your destination country (see *Get a local SIM card*, page 34).

Tips:

- Use SMS, and encourage people to SMS rather than phone you. Your phone company may also offer a web-based text-messaging service whereby people who don't have a mobile phone can send you text messages.

- Not all carriers provide SMS, and unfortunately the ones that offer cheap calls may have more expensive SMS and vice versa. Consider what you'll mainly be using when you choose a carrier.

- Divert all incoming calls straight to voicemail, so you don't pay for the calls.

- You may have a choice of carriers in each country, possibly varying throughout the country. Some charge different rates for peak and off-peak times. Before you leave, check what options you'll be offered and find out everything you can (costs, services, coverage, etc.).

For example, **VODAFONE** has preferred partners with cheaper rates in some countries, so it makes sense to choose them — see its website for details. **TELSTRA** and **OPTUS** have very detailed information about carrier call costs, service availability and network coverage on their websites.

RATES PER MINUTE* OR PER SMS (\$)**

	AUSTRALIAN-BASED PHONE CARDS		OTHER PHONE CARDS (PREPAID)		MOBILE PHONE: INTERNATIONAL ROAMING AND SMS				
	Telstra PhoneAway (A) (B) or Telecard (C)	Optus Calling Card (B) (D)	Nobelcom phonecard (E)	ekit (B) (F)	Telstra Mobile International Roaming (G)	Telstra IR SMS	Optus AutoRoam (H)	Optus AutoRoam SMS	Vodafone Global Roaming (J)
ASIA / PACIFIC									
China	1.15	0.97	0.68	1.30	1.81-2.72	0.46 (P)	1.97-2.83	0.35-0.40	2.07 (Q)
Fiji	1.15	1.07	1.81	na	2.70	0.57	2.91	0.16	3.02 (Q)
Hong Kong	0.55	0.45	0.21	0.48	1.74-2.55	0.49-0.72 (P)	1.62-2.63	0.35-0.55	2.30
India	1.50 (L)	1.25	0.77	na	1.77-3.32	0.42-0.83 (P)	2.56-3.21	0.63	3.35
Indonesia / Bali	1.15	0.97	0.36	1.05	5.73-6.04	0.13-0.32 (P)	4.48-6.29	0.11-0.22	6.45
Malaysia	0.80	0.68	0.16	0.34	1.78-2.92	0.52-0.60 (P)	1.94-2.29	0.43-0.46	2.30
New Zealand	0.40	0.31	0.13	0.26	3.70	0.65	1.89-3.43	0.44	3.02 (Q)
Singapore	0.60	0.50	0.14	0.83	0.97-1.33	0.27-0.41	0.95-1.13	0.17-0.31	1.08 (Q)
Thailand	1.15	0.97	0.46	3.81	1.57-2.11	0.59 (P)	1.48-1.78	0.45	1.20
Vietnam	1.50 (L)	1.60	na	na	2.63-5.00	na	1.22-5.62	0.36-0.40	6.45
EUROPE									
France	0.65	0.54	0.07	0.23-0.59	2.80-3.26	0.41 (P)	1.90-3.39	0.25-0.38	3.02 (Q)
Italy	0.60	0.50	0.07	0.33-0.78	1.48-5.48	0.34-0.41	1.53-5.68	0.26-0.43	5.04 (Q)
Turkey	1.05	0.88	0.40	1.12	4.32-6.18	0.44-0.50	3.10-4.44	0.23-0.33	5.60
UK	0.45	0.37	0.11	0.12-0.96	2.91-4.34	0.51 (P)	1.91-3.67	0.30-0.39	3.02 (Q)
AMERICAS									
Argentina	1.40	1.21	0.38	2.16	na	na	0.97-1.14	0.31-0.32	na
Brazil	1.40	1.21	0.13 (M)	0.77	4.22-4.27	0.46-0.89	0.97-1.14	0.10	na
USA	0.40	0.31	0.04 (N)	0.09-0.39	1.74-2.75	0.38-0.67 (P)	1.80-2.33	0.29-0.43 (P)	2.30
AFRICA									
Egypt	na	1.32	0.64	na	2.09-3.77	0.51 (P)	3.25-4.06	0.34	5.04 (Q)
Kenya	na	1.68	1.27	na	5.97-6.76	0.34-0.37	5.29-6.61	0.30	na
Morocco	na	2.62	na	na	6.83-6.88	0.76 (P)	4.89-6.11	0.63	5.60

Some questions for your mobile phone company:

- If you phone someone in Australia/the country you're in/a third country, how much will you pay?
- If someone in Australia/the country you're in/a third country phones you, how much will you pay?
- How much does it cost to send SMS?
- If someone SMSs you, how much will you pay?
- If you divert all incoming calls straight to voicemail, then check your voicemail from overseas, how much will you pay?
- What other services are offered for international travel, and what are the charges?

GET A LOCAL SIM CARD

If you're spending a lot of time in one country, it may be worth buying a local SIM card for your phone.

However, if you're going to several countries for short periods of time it probably won't be worthwhile, as you'll have to buy lots of different ones. You may be able to get one that lets you 'roam' over a smaller area (within Europe, say), which could be cheaper than roaming from Australia to Europe. However, check whether a prepaid service (which is what you'll be getting) allows international roaming.

Tips:

- Make sure your phone's compatible with the country/ies you're going to (see *International roaming*, page 33).
- Also make sure your phone's not SIM-locked or network-locked — you may have to pay a hefty fee to have it unlocked. VODAFONE doesn't have SIM locking at all; the other major networks have it for varying amounts of time. If you're not sure whether this applies to you, check with your carrier.
- You'll have to tell people back home what your new number is. It may be possible to remote-access the voicemail box of your regular mobile phone number from overseas, and record a message telling people your temporary number.
- Be clear about what you're getting for your money. One traveller bought a £20 VODAFONE SIM card in Britain, but it only included £1 worth of call credits — the rest was for the card itself. Weeks later he bought a VODAFONE SIM card of similar value in Spain, but that was all call credits.
- The instructions for setting up your SIM card may be in the local language, so depending on

OTHER

a Australia
t Reverse
ge (K)

- * To landlines in Australia. Calls to mobile phones may be more expensive.
- ** Prices are subject to currency fluctuations, and were current in late July 2004.
- na Not available.
- (A) Plus 44.5 cents verification fee. This is a prepaid card.
- (B) Voicemail service available.
- (C) Plus \$1.50 verification fee. This is a postpaid card.
- (D) Plus \$1.38 (93 cent surcharge and 45 cent connection fee). This is a postpaid card.
- (E) Prices are given for the Nobel Worldwide card, except in the US where it's the Hello Australia card (others are available). Rates converted from \$US at A\$1 = US\$0.70. For details see www.nobelcom.com.
- (F) Plus a US\$0.50 service fee per call. Rates vary according to where you're calling from; the cheaper rate shown is for 'economy' access numbers in big cities, the more expensive rate is what you'll pay from a payphone; other places in between.
- (G) Prices vary according to international exchange rates and choice of overseas carrier; we've shown the range. Telstra's website has a list of carrier options and prices.
- (H) Rates vary for peak and off-peak calls, as well as between carriers; we've shown the range.
- (I) Roaming is only available to Pay Monthly customers. SMS costs 75 cents.
- (K) Plus \$4.25 service fee; three-minute minimum charge. You have to dial an access number.
- (L) Not available on PhoneAway.
- (M) Sao Paulo only.
- (N) Doesn't include Alaska.
- (P) Not available on some networks.
- (Q) Preferential rates — you have to select a designated preferred carrier to get this rate.

your language skills you may need help setting it up.

COMBINED INTERNATIONAL ROAMING AND LOCAL SIM

You may be able to use a combination of a local SIM card and your regular (Australian) SIM card on international roaming, and swap them around as required.

For example, you could arrive in your destination country and buy a local SIM card. When you find out what the number is, you can then access the voicemail box for your regular number and record a message telling people what your new, temporary number is. Then insert your local SIM card.

If you travel out of that country for a few days, you could put your regular SIM back in and use it on international roaming; likewise, if you just want to check for SMS or voicemail messages, pop your regular SIM in.

OTHER OPTIONS

IDD FROM A PUBLIC PHONE

Using coins or a public phone card, you can't go wrong — you simply pay as you go with no nasty surprises.



PHONE REVERSE CHARGES

Good for an important call, this is a convenient, cashless way to make a call. However, it's more expensive than other options (except possibly hotels).

TELSTRA has a reverse-charge service (Australia Direct Reverse Charge) available from over 70 countries — see the table for prices. You'll need to know the access number to take advantage of it — something worth noting before you leave. If you don't have these access numbers with you, or you're calling from a non-participating country, charges will depend on what the local phone company charges.

CALLING FROM A HOTEL

Charges can be astronomical, and if you're footing the bill you're better off avoiding it. But when you've just arrived in a strange country, it's cold, it's dark, you're tired and jetlagged, you don't know the language, haven't seen a public phone and have no idea how best to work the system, it's tempting to use the hotel phone. Just don't do it often unless you have money to burn.

Tips:

- Check costs with the hotel reception before making a call — even to 'toll-free' numbers (see *Local prepaid phone cards*, page 32).
- If you're phoning someone nice, get them to call you back. Make sure you've got the phone number and your room number handy.
- In Singapore (and it's worth at least asking in other countries) hotels aren't allowed to charge a surcharge, so you're paying regular rates.

INTERNET PHONE CALLS

Some internet cafes have telephones offering cheap international calls over the internet (using Voice over Internet Protocol, or VoIP, and a suitable receiver). Some phone card companies also use VoIP, although you access it from a normal phone, and may not be aware you're using it. The call quality may not be as good as a regular phone line, although in some cases it can be better.

MORE INFORMATION

General

- www.aca.gov.au

Phone cards

- www.ekit.com
- www.nobelcom.com
- www.telstra.com.au/callingcardshop
- www.optus.com.au

Mobile phone services

- www.gsmworld.com
- www.telstra.com.au/mobile/products/overseas
- www.optus.com.au
- www.vodafone.com.au

Is your car a lemon?

AUSTRALIAN IMAGES

What are your rights if your car spends more time in the service centre than on the road?

IN A NUTSHELL

■ For some reason cars seem to be treated differently from just about any other product: it's very difficult to get a refund or a replacement car if yours is defective and can't be fixed — even when it's still under warranty.

■ Australia needs 'lemon laws' to address this, like the US has. In the meantime, your state's fair trading or consumer affairs department may be able to help you find a solution with the dealer or manufacturer.

When you decide to buy a new car rather than a used one, you probably expect to buy the peace of mind of faultless performance for at least a few years.

And in the vast majority of cases you won't be disappointed.

But every so often a new car will develop a problem. You take it back to the dealer to be fixed under warranty. But a little while later the same problem comes up again. You're a bit suspicious now, have a closer look at the car, and notice a couple of other things that aren't quite as they should be. So the car goes back to the service centre.

Months down the track, your car seems to spend more time at the dealership than on the road, because a problem just doesn't seem to be fixable or new ones keep cropping up. You've bought yourself a lemon.

WHAT'S A LEMON?

In the US, all states have 'lemon laws', which give consumers the right to get their money back or a new replacement car if they buy a lemon. There, a car qualifies as a lemon if the same defect can't be repaired in a certain number of attempts, and/or if the car has spent a certain amount of time in the workshop over a 12–24-month period while still under warranty. The problems must be due to a manufacturing fault rather than a design fault present in all models of a batch (which would be covered by a model recall) or a fault of the dealer.

In Australia there are no comparable laws. There's some protection under the Trade Practices Act, which requires products to be of merchantable quality and fit for their purpose. While ill-fitting carpet or trim are unlikely to make a car unmerchantable, a faulty gearbox or engine may. However, in practice it's proven very difficult for consumers to get a refund on their problem car or have it replaced with a new one. For a rare success story, see *Unhappy campers*, page 7.

Dealers and manufacturers will usually keep repairing problems under warranty, but repeated repairs mean the car's unavailable and you have to find other ways of getting around. And eventually the warranty will run out, and you may still have to foot further repair bills — or decide to pass the problem on to an unsuspecting buyer...

WHAT YOU CAN DO

■ Every lemon saga starts with a first problem. So keep any invoices and other paperwork relating to repairs right from the beginning.

■ If there are ongoing problems your repairer can't fix, complain to your dealership manager in writing, including any supporting documentation.

■ If you get no joy from the dealer, it's time to approach the manufacturer for a solution. Even if you're feeling pretty annoyed and stressed by this stage, it pays to remain calm and objective when negotiating. If composing strong but still polite letters isn't your forte, the CHOICE book *Put it in writing* can help you find the right words (see *Consumer Bookshelf* on page 47 to order a copy).

■ If contacting the manufacturer doesn't result in a satisfactory solution, get in touch with your state's motoring organisation for an independent inspection of your car.

■ You can also lodge a formal complaint with your state's fair trading or consumer affairs department. The department generally tries to mediate a solution between you and the dealer or manufacturer. If that's unsuccessful, you usually have the option of taking the matter to a small claims tribunal or similar (your state's fair trading/consumer affairs department will advise you).

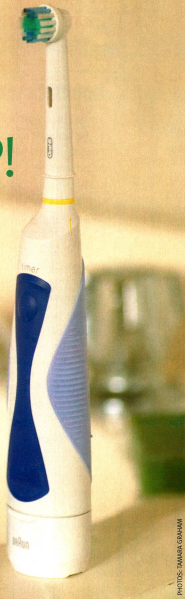
■ Finally, if the tribunal decision doesn't go your way, you could decide to use the court system — but that can very quickly become very expensive.

LEMON LAWS REQUIRED

We'd like to see the introduction of lemon laws in Australia. They may only apply to a few cases each year. But if a car is genuinely unfixable, you should be able to return it to the dealer for a replacement or refund — as you can do with any other merchandise that can't be fixed.

BRUSH UP!

There's a large price range,
but do bigger bucks equal
a better clean?



PHOTOS: TAMARA GRAHAM

IN A NUTSHELL

- It's now thought one type of electric toothbrush can give you a better clean than a manual brush.
- Five brushes rated "good" overall in our tests.
- Price isn't a reliable indicator of effectiveness.

Does an electric toothbrush really give you a better clean than a manual one? Until recently most articles on the subject said 'no' — they clean your teeth as well as manual brushes, but not better. But as we first reported in CHOICE, July 2004, some dental research now suggests that rotation oscillation powered brushes (where the brush actually rotates in each direction) may indeed be better than manual for removing plaque.

The jury is still out as to whether this is because electric brushes really do a better job or whether people are just more likely to use them and/or to brush for longer with one. Certainly with young children it's known an electric brush can mean they do clean their teeth. They're also useful for people with poor manual dexterity.

We asked 14 people to try out 10 different models of rotation oscillation electric toothbrushes (all widely available AA battery-operated and rechargeable models for each brand on the market). Half the trialists already used one at home, the other half didn't. Our lab also ran tests on the toothbrushes to

see which had the longest staying power and what ongoing costs there would be.

Five models stood out as good performers — see *What to buy*, page 38. Comments and ratings from trialists indicated these brushes were comfortable and easy to use, gentle on the mouth yet still powerful enough to give teeth a good clean.

Price wasn't a reliable indicator of performance. While the top-priced ORAL-B Professional Care 7000 (\$119.95) was rated 'good', so were the budget-priced TIFFANY Electric Toothbrush TBFP (\$24.95) and COLGATE Actibrush (\$20). This ORAL-B did have more features, including a built-in timer — to tell you when you've been brushing for the recommended two minutes — that some users liked (two cheaper brushes had this as well). But only you can decide whether extras like this justify the big price difference.

Overall our trialists found:

- One-button-operated models (the same switch for on and off) were easier to use than two-button models (separate switches for each): finding the right button to turn off could be difficult with the toothbrush in their mouth.
- Smaller cleaning heads were easier to manoeuvre, particularly for cleaning back teeth.
- Brushes with a tapered handle and a non-slip grip felt more comfortable and secure to use.

STAYING POWER

Our battery test showed big differences in staying power that might be a deciding factor in your choice of brush. For example, if you travel a lot you'd want one that doesn't run out of steam every few days, so that you don't have to pack your recharger too or keep buying new AA batteries.

Convenience isn't the only factor — ongoing power and battery costs also make a difference between models. All the rechargeables tested cost less than \$2 a year in power costs, but for models with replaceable AA alkaline batteries the annual cost can be as high as \$30, as with the SUNBEAM TB5500B. And of course rechargeable batteries are much friendlier to the environment than constantly using and throwing out disposables.

The best rechargeable toothbrushes in terms of uses per charge are the TIFFANY and the ORAL-B Professional Care 7000, which should last for 30 brushes (a bit better than a fortnight at two brushes per day). This compares with just 10 from the ORAL-B AdvancePower 800. The best of those with AA alkaline batteries is the COLGATE Actibrush, which should give

you more than five months' worth of brushing twice a day from its two batteries. The table has usage details for all the brushes tested.

A further cost to bear in mind is for replacement heads. You're generally recommended to replace the brush head every three months, so annual replacement costs would vary from about \$7.20 per person for the **TIFFANY** (though see footnote (B), below) to around \$24 for three of the **ORAL-B** models — which adds up to nearly \$100 annually for a family of four. This compares to annual replacement costs of \$4–\$20 per person for manual toothbrushes.

NO NEED TO SPEND BIG

What our trial shows is that if you'd like to try an electric brush, you don't need to pick an expensive model. Buy one of the cheapies in our *What to buy* list, and if you don't like the feel of it after a week or so, you won't have lost much if you stop using it. A manual toothbrush will still give teeth a good clean — just make sure you brush for at least two minutes each time with either type of brush. ■

Special teeth

Are electric toothbrushes suitable for:

- **Orthodontic bands?** Maybe. Brushing is very important if you have bands on so an electric brush could help here, as long as you don't dislodge the wires or brackets. The Australian Dental Association recommends discussing it with your orthodontist as it's usually decided on a case-by-case basis.
- **Dentures?** Yes. Electric brushes can be useful for cleaning properly, particularly if you also have poor manual dexterity.
- **Implanted teeth?** Yes. A recent survey found rotation oscillation powered brushes were well-suited to cleaning implanted teeth, but still discuss your individual situation with your dentist.

What to buy

The top-rating toothbrushes are profiled in alphabetical order. Trialist comments are in *italics*.

BRAUN ORAL-B BATTERY TOOTHBRUSH TIMER

Price: \$29.95

Runs on two AA alkaline batteries

A brush with a built-in timer, this was one of the easiest to manoeuvre and had the easiest switch to use. It gave teeth a good clean and was well powered, but was one of the noisiest in the trial and was considered heavier than other models.

"Felt this cleaned teeth most effectively of all the brushes, and massaged gums in the best way."



COLGATE ACTIBRUSH

Price: \$20

BEST BUY

Runs on two AA alkaline batteries

Easy to use and to manoeuvre while cleaning teeth, it was rated as one of the most effective models at cleaning teeth in the trial. Trialists liked the shape of the cleaning head and found it easy to attach and remove. The weight felt right, and most trialists found the toothbrush comfortable to grip — though a couple found the handle a little large.

"Very good. Did the job very well — no instructions needed."



ORAL-B ADVANCEPOWER 800

Price: \$39.95

Rechargeable battery

Almost all trialists thought this was better than using a manual toothbrush. Reasonably easy to use, it was also comfortable to grip and one of the easiest to manoeuvre. Just over half of the trialists found the vibrations a bit strong (some found them very strong) and a couple had difficulty operating the two buttons.

"Was able to clean parts of back teeth in a way that manual toothbrushes can't."



Brand / model (in order of user trial rating)

BRAUN ORAL-B Battery Toothbrush Timer

COLGATE Actibrush

ORAL-B AdvancePower 800 Powered by Braun

ORAL-B Professional Care 7000 Powered by Braun

TIFFANY Electric Toothbrush TBFP

HOMEDICS PowerDent Deluxe Rechargeable Toothbrush HD-210C

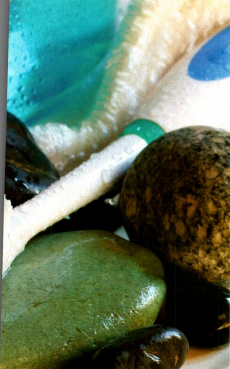
SUNBEAM SensAction Cordless Plaque Remover TB6700B

WISDOM Powerflex

ORAL-B CrossAction Power

SUNBEAM SensAction Battery Operated Plaque Remover TB5500B

	PERFORMANCE		3 FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS	
	1 User trial rating	2 Uses per charge (claimed / measured)	Charging unit wall-mountable	Charging indicator light	Timer	Speeds	Pressure sensor	Indicator bristles	Battery type	Full charge time (h)
BRAUN ORAL-B Battery Toothbrush Timer	Good	182 / 193	na	na	✓	1		✓	2 x AA alkaline	na
COLGATE Actibrush	Good	250 / 328	na	na		1			2 x AA alkaline	na
ORAL-B AdvancePower 800 Powered by Braun	Good	10 / 10				1		✓	NiCad	16
ORAL-B Professional Care 7000 Powered by Braun	Good	23 / 30	✓	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	NiMH	16
TIFFANY Electric Toothbrush TBFP	Good	23 / 30	✓	✓		1			Rechargeable (A)	16
HOMEDICS PowerDent Deluxe Rechargeable Toothbrush HD-210C	OK	ns / 20	✓	✓		1	✓		NiCad	16
SUNBEAM SensAction Cordless Plaque Remover TB6700B	OK	ns / 28	✓	✓		1			NiMH	14
WISDOM Powerflex	OK	ns / 253	na	na	✓	1			2 x AA alkaline	na
ORAL-B CrossAction Power	Borderline	ns / 151	na	na		1		✓	1 x AA alkaline	na
SUNBEAM SensAction Battery Operated Plaque Remover TB5500B	Borderline	ns / 85	na	na		1			2 x AA alkaline	na



What to look for

See the table for which models have the features mentioned below.

- **Timer:** The Australian Dental Association recommends you brush for two to three minutes, and three brushes on test have a timer to help you achieve this. Trialists were divided on this function: some found it useful, others irritating.
- **Number of speeds:** Only one model tested had more than one speed, and trialists were divided about how useful this was.
- **Pressure sensor:** If you're worried about brushing too hard, the pressure sensor on the ORAL-B Professional Care 7000 makes pulsation stop when you press too hard. The

HOMEDICS' pressure sensor is different: it has an optional setting that won't operate the brush unless you apply sufficient pressure to your teeth.

- **Indicator bristles:** The ORAL-Bs are fitted with cleaning heads whose bristles fade over time to remind you when it's time to change heads.
- **Rechargeable batteries:** NiMH batteries are environmentally 'cleaner' than NiCads — see the table for which models have which.
- **The comfort factor:** Generally, small cleaning heads were found to be more comfortable in the mouth — and made cleaning back teeth easier — than larger ones. Also hold a brush before you buy to check it feels comfortable in your hand.

ORAL-B PROFESSIONAL CARE 7000

Price: \$119.95
Rechargeable battery
The most expensive brush in the trial, it has extra features like two speeds and a timer, though users were divided about how useful these are. It was effective at cleaning teeth, reasonably gentle on gums and easy to use and manoeuvre; the weight was good and the head easy to attach and remove. However, it was one of the noisiest brushes in the trial. Apart from the noise, which is a little off-putting, this toothbrush was easy and comfortable to use and effective."



TIFFANY ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH TBFF

Price: \$24.95 **BEST BUY**

Rechargeable battery
The majority of trialists felt this brush cleaned both front and back teeth reasonably well, with just over half indicating it was better than a manual toothbrush. The switch was easy to use and the brush easy to manoeuvre, and it was reasonably easy to attach and remove the cleaning head. However, trialists reported this brush to be the harshest on gums. "Lots of strength — good if you like a 'hard' brush."



WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The remaining electric toothbrushes weren't as popular with trialists for various reasons:

- Half the trialists found the HOMEDICS' handle uncomfortable to grip, and the brush was considered fairly noisy.
- The SUNBEAM TB6700B's buttons were hard to use and it was only rated 'reasonably effective' at cleaning teeth.
- Almost half the trialists thought the WISDOM was fairly ineffective at cleaning their teeth and some also found it fairly noisy.
- Half the trialists found the ORAL-B CrossAction Power to be ineffective at cleaning their teeth, though most still rated it no worse than a manual toothbrush.
- Two thirds of trialists thought the SUNBEAM TB5500B was noisy and there were mixed feelings about how comfortable it was to grip; several trialists also found using the buttons difficult. However, most thought it cleaned their teeth effectively.

Brush model	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	COSTS			
				Annual power / battery cost (\$)*	Replacement brush head cost (\$)	Annual running cost (\$)**	Price (\$†)
Oral-B Professional Care 7000	2	Germany	Gillette	13.20	6.00	37.20	29.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	1	China	Colgate-Palmolive	7.75	5.50	29.75	20.00
Oral-B CrossAction Power	2	Germany	Gillette	<2.00	6.00	25.60	39.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	2	Germany	Gillette	<2.00	6.00	25.80	119.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	1	China	GAF Control	<2.00	1.80 (B)	9.20 (B)	24.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	1	China	Hagemeyer	<2.00	4.45 (C)	18.80 (C)	29.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	1	China	Sunbeam	<2.00	5.00 (C)	21.40 (C)	39.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	ns	China	Wisdom Brands	10.05	4.35 (C)	27.45 (C)	18.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	ns	China / Germany	Gillette	8.40	5.00	28.40	15.95
Oral-B CrossAction Power	1	China	Sunbeam	29.90	5.00 (C)	49.90 (C)	24.95

na Not applicable — doesn't use rechargeable batteries.

ns Not stated.

* Annual power costs for all rechargeable batteries are calculated to be less than \$2.

** Includes annual cost of batteries (or power) and replacement brushes (four per year).

† Prices are recommended retail, as supplied by manufacturers in July 2004.

(A) Type not stated.

(B) Comes with four heads so costs only apply from the second year.

(C) Comes with two heads so costs only apply after six months.

1 User trial rating

Fourteen people each tried six toothbrushes for a minimum of four brushings each. Half were electric toothbrush users while the other half weren't.

2 Uses per charge

See Staying power, page 37.

3 Features

See What to look for, above, for a discussion of the features in the table.

Machines for big and small loads

Finally: a BIG front loader for the larger family.

We added the results of 10 newly tested washing machines (five front and five top loaders) to our comprehensive database. Together with the results of previously tested machines that are still on the market, we can give you the results for 43 washing machines, from small models with a 4.5–5.5 kg capacity to big 9–10 kg machines.

Three of the newly tested machines made it into the *What to buy* list, with two of them topping the previous top scorers in the medium (MIELE Novotronic W 1986) and large (LG WD-1019BD) size brackets. No change at the top of the smaller machines — the MIELE Novotronic W 828 remained top of the list, a place it's held since we first tested it in 2002.

MATTERS OF SIZE

Larger machines (with a capacity of 7.5 kg and more) aren't new in our tests, but in the past we've rarely found front loaders in this size segment — the largest front loader we can remember testing had a capacity of 8 kg. So to find one that would take a 10 kg load was quite a surprise.

The LG WD-1019BD stood out in more respects than just for its 10 kg drum capacity. This machine is bigger than a traditional front loader, making it unsuitable for under-benchtop installation. And because its controls are on top at the back, you can't sit a clothes dryer on top of it either. But if you want a large washer and have the space to accommodate this one, it outperformed all the other machines in this size bracket. Its large door opening and inclined drum also make loading and unloading easy (see the photo, above). However, it's expensive.

As in the past, all the front loaders in this test outperformed the top loaders of similar capacity, as the table (page 44) shows. All have higher overall scores and are gentler on clothes. The only downsides are their often higher purchase price (though they're all cheaper to run) and longer cycle times.

Size is a factor concerning two of the SIMPSON Eziset machines too. The 550 365550L is claimed to have a 5.5 kg capacity and the 605 365605L to be 6 kg. However, their external and drum dimensions are identical. It seems Electrolux (the manufacturer) is marketing what's basically the same machine to people wanting a small machine as well as those wanting one a bit bigger. In our tests their performance only differed marginally, mainly for water and energy consumption, with the 'larger' of the two using more of both. So don't let the higher-capacity claim influence you to buy a 'bigger' machine — what you'll get is one that takes in more water, plus has a 'time remaining' indicator. Worth \$80?

IN A NUTSHELL

■ **Test results for 43 washing machines, including 10 newly tested models.**

■ **Your choice made easy:** we've picked the best-performing machines and Best Buys in all size ranges — including the biggest front loader we've ever tested.

WHAT TO BUY

Although the majority of the machines reported on in this article have been tested in the past, our *What to buy* list and *Best Buys* change from test to test. As new machines become available, others are discontinued and prices change.

Best Buy indicates that a model is a reasonable performer in its size range and its combined purchase price and running costs are comparatively low. In the list below we've included, if possible, the top performers and Best Buys for front and top loaders in each size range.

Small (up to 5.5 kg)

MIELE NOVOTRONIC W 828 (fr)	\$1799
WHIRLPOOL AWM 5100 (fr) ▶ BEST BUY	\$782
FISHER & PAYKEL PRIDE MW511 (tp)	\$599
HOOVER 500MD (tp)	\$649
New SIMPSON EZISET 550 365550L (tp) ▶ BEST BUY	\$699

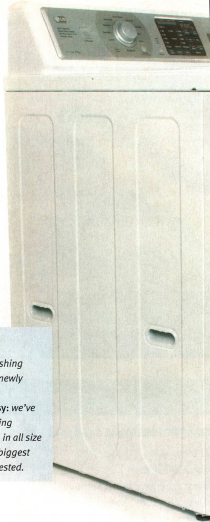
Medium (6–7 kg)

New MIELE NOVOTRONIC W 1986 (fr)	\$2999
WHIRLPOOL 6 th SENSE AWM 8121 (fr) ▶ BEST BUY	\$968
WESTINGHOUSE LT609S COMPLETE CARE (tp)	\$799
HOOVER 600MD (tp) ▶ BEST BUY	\$749

Large (7.5 kg or more)

New LG WD-1019BD (fr)	\$1999
FISHER & PAYKEL INTUITIVE ECO IW812 (tp) ▶ BEST BUY	\$1099

fr — front loader, tp — top loader





Useful features

- **Out-of-balance correction:** Automatically detects and redistributes an out-of-balance load, either by spinning slowly before the full spin cycle or, as most top loaders do, by taking in extra water.
- **Anti-crease:** Some models have a permanent-press or 'creasables' cycle designed for easily creased or pleated fabrics. Others may deal with them by not draining the last rinse water, by not spinning after the water has drained or by continuing to tumble at the end of the cycle.
- **Selectable spin speed:** Lets you change the set spin speed on some chosen programs.
- **Load sensor:** This can help you save water and energy, particularly with smaller loads.
- **Extra rinse:** Useful if you're sensitive to detergent.
- **Water saver:** Lets you use less water for rinsing, or reuse sudsy and/or rinse water.
- **Child lock:** When set, programs can't be changed during a cycle.
- **Favourite program:** You can program your preferred wash option for future use at the touch of a button.

How reliable have subscribers found them?

We asked our subscribers whether their washing machine (bought in or after 1996) had needed repair in the previous 12 months, and whether they'd buy the same brand again. Washing machines were one of the most unreliable appliances in our survey. Overall, 15% had needed repairing, with front loaders slightly more likely to than top loaders. Most commonly reported were out-of-balance problems.

Differences of 8% or more between brands are meaningful. The numbers in brackets are the number of responses we received for each brand.

Percentage not needing repair

Miele (330)	94
Hitachi (188)	91
Bosch (191)	88
LG (616)	88
Simpson (1092)	88
Maytag (306)	87
Hoover (1255)	86
Westinghouse (176)	86
Fisher & Paykel (2894)	85
Whirlpool (957)	85
Kleenmaid (320)	80
Asko (442)	78
Ariston (158)	73
Bendix (139)	64

Percentage who'd buy the same brand again

Miele (333)	96
Bosch (196)	88
Asko (445)	87
Simpson (1097)	86
Westinghouse (175)	86
Fisher & Paykel (2915)	85
Hitachi (189)	85
LG (620)	85
Hoover (1269)	81
Maytag (308)	81
Whirlpool (966)	80
Kleenmaid (321)	77
Ariston (160)	67
Bendix (140)	51

MORE INFO

For help choosing a model that'll suit you, go to www.choiceextra.com.au and under 'washing machines' click on **Compare-a-washer** and type in your requirements.

For tips on how to save water and energy in the laundry, go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on Sep 03 under 'washing machines' in the index. Our article in *CHOICE*, September 2003, also gives this information.

If you're a personal subscriber to *CHOICE*, don't have the relevant back issue and don't have access to the internet, please phone our Consumer Services people on 1800 069 552 and ask them to send you a copy.



Profiles: Top performers and Best Buys

UP TO 5.5 KG

MIELE NOVOTRONIC W 828



MIELE AUSTRALIA

Price: \$1799
Front loader

The best front loader in this size range has a quick-wash option for less heavily soiled loads and a special woollens program for items labelled handwash only. Its door opening is comparatively small but opens fully (to 180°), making loading and unloading easier. It also has an 'update' facility, which allows service personnel to reprogram the controls as new technology becomes available. On the downside: its price.

WHIRLPOOL AWM 5100

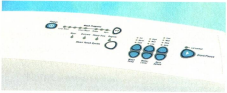


VANESSA MARSHALL

Price: \$782
Front loader **BEST BUY**

The Best Buy of the smaller front loaders is one of the most water-efficient in the test and a good performer overall. While it has a pretty long 'normal' cycle time, you can shorten it with a 'rapid' button or use a quick-wash program for lightly soiled clothes. It has a relatively large door opening, making loading and unloading easy.

FISHER & PAYKEL PRIDE MW511



TAMARA GRHAM

Price: \$599
Top loader

This equal best top loader in this size range scored well for spin and energy efficiency, but it's not very gentle on clothes or very water-efficient.

HOOVER 500MD



ANTHONY SAWERS

Price: \$649
Top loader

Also equal best top loader, this pretty basic machine, with none of the bells and whistles, is an overall good performer and scored well for dirt removal. It has a lid that's stable and is easy to load and unload, but it's not the gentlest on clothes.

SIMPSON EZISET 550 36550L



TAMARA GRHAM

Price: \$699
Top loader **BEST BUY**

The Best Buy of the three best top loaders in this size bracket is the most water-efficient in its class. It's very easy to use, has good controls and markings and a fast-wash option. However, its gentleness score is the lowest of all the machines reported on.

6-7 KG

MIELE NOVOTRONIC W 1986



TAMARA GRHAM

Price: \$2999
Front loader

The best front loader in this size range is very easy to use, with good controls, markings and detergent dispenser. It has a special woollens program for items labelled handwash only, a fast-wash option and the shortest 'normal' wash cycle of the front loaders reported on. On the downside: its price.

WHIRLPOOL 6TH SENSE AWM 8121



ANTHONY SAWERS

Price: \$968
Front loader **BEST BUY**

The Best Buy medium-size front loader scored well in all areas, has intuitive controls and a wide range of features including a fast-wash program and water-saving option. It scored well for spin efficiency, but has the second longest 'normal' wash cycle of 152 minutes.

WESTINGHOUSE LT609S COMPLETE CARE



TAMARA GRHAM

Price: \$799
Top loader

An overall good performer with a good dirt removal score and good water efficiency for a top loader. It has a glass top/lid, self-levelling rollers and a 'time remaining' indicator. On the downside, it's not the gentlest on clothes, like all top loaders.

HOOVER 600MD



COLLEENIA HOME PRODUCTS PTY LTD

Price: \$749
Top loader **BEST BUY**

This is the cheapest to buy of the better top loaders in this size range and has comparatively low running costs. It has a good dirt removal score, but like all top loaders, it's not very gentle on clothes.

7.5 KG OR LARGER

LG WD-1019BD

Price: \$1999

Front loader

A front loader in this size bracket is rare, and this one performed well overall. It's easy to use, with top scores for markings, loading and unloading and using the detergent dispenser. It has a fast-wash option and 'time remaining' indicator. On the downside: its price.



TAMARA GRAHAM

FISHER & PAYKEL INTUITIVE ECO IW812



Price: \$1099

Top loader

An overall good performer, this machine is very energy- and spin-efficient for a top loader. It senses the fabric type of the load and adjusts the wash cycle and action accordingly. It has specially designed programs for specific stains, good controls and a heavy, sturdy lid.



ANTHONY SAWYER

For people with a disability

We asked an occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre NSW to assess the washing machines to see which are a better choice for people with various disabilities.

If you're a wheelchair user, a front loader with a wide opening and a door that opens 180° is easier to load and unload while sitting, especially if it's mounted on a platform so you don't have to lean down. The ASKO Quattro W6021 and ARISTON Margherita 2000 AL129X would be particularly suitable for a wheelchair user.

If you're visually impaired, you want a machine with large, well-spaced markings and good contrast, as well as good feedback such as lights or loud beeps when you press the buttons. The FISHER & PAYKEL and SIMPSON Eziset machines and the WESTINGHOUSE LT609S Complete Care are good in this respect. Their controls are easy to read and operate, and you can program your favourite wash cycle and then just use it by pressing a button.

If you have problems using your hands, make sure the door is easy to open and the detergent dispenser easy to use. Look for large, raised dials with a crossbar that's easy to grip, or buttons that are easy to press. Models such as the FISHER & PAYKELs with one-touch start or programming minimise the need to use your hands. The WESTINGHOUSE LT609S Complete Care is easy to open and has a shallow and small drum to reach into. The MIELE NOVOTRONIC W 1986, BOSCH MAXX 1000 WFL 2000 and ASKO Quattro W6021 are suitable front loaders.

Notes to the table overleaf

Square brackets indicate technically similar models.

Newly tested models.

* Some models need a Y-shaped connector or a cap for the inlet valve to connect to cold water only; it may be supplied or need to be bought separately.

** Dimensions are for the smallest box that fits around the machine, allowing for inlets and drain hoses.

† Warranty conditions vary; check with the manufacturer.

‡ Prices are recommended or average retail, as provided by manufacturers in June/July 2004.

ns Not stated.

(A) This model has been discontinued, but you may still find it in shops.

(B) There have been model number changes since we first tested this machine, but it's still technically the same (500MB tested now 500MD; 600MB now 600MD, 750CL now 750LD, 800RLC now 800RLD).

(C) There have been model number changes since we first tested this machine, but it's still technically the same (GW511 tested now GW512, GW611 now GW612, IW711 now IW712, GW711 now GW712, IW811 now IW812; all the new models include a water-saving feature).

(D) Delay finish.

(E) Adds four extra rinses to some programs, giving a total rinse cycle of seven.

(F) Including a recycle option for wash and deep-rinse water.

(G) On installation, the service technician has to reprogram it to take in cold water only.

1 Type

The top-loading machines work either via an agitator or an impeller. An agitator sticks up through the centre of the drum from the base and twists and turns the clothes to create movement through the water. Impeller models have an open drum with the impeller at the bottom — it looks like a small bump in the base with ridges that run out from the centre. Movement is created by the impeller's rotation in the base of the drum, creating turbulence.

2 Overall score

Dirt removal makes up 40% of the overall score — gentleness and spin, water and energy efficiency are each 15%. All tests are on a 'normal' warm wash cycle.

3 Dirt removal score

We measured how much light was reflected from specially soiled swatches before and after washing. We use a

spectrocolorimeter, which is more accurate than the human eye; differences of around 6% are visible. The evenness of the wash is also taken into account.

4 Gentleness score

We attached swatches of easily frayed fabric to the garments in each load, measuring the unfrayed area of the swatch before and after the wash.

5 Spin efficiency score

We weighed the clothes before and after the wash to see how well the machine extracts water on the highest spin speed.

6 Energy efficiency score

This is calculated according to the kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity used for each kilogram of washing, including heating the water.

7 Water efficiency score/water used

We measured the amount of water used per 'normal' wash and

calculated the amount of water used per kilogram of the test load.

8 Noise

These are the maximum noise levels recorded during the spin cycle, measured 1 m away from the machine and 1 m above the ground. The noise level of these machines is around that of a normal conversation.

9 Features

See page 41 for an explanation of these and other useful features.

10 Running costs

This is an estimate of how much it'll cost you over 10 years for water and electricity if you wash the equivalent of one load every day using a 'normal' cycle, based on 12.5 cents per kWh for electricity and \$1 per 1000 L for water, and including any electricity used when the machine's switched on but not in use.

PERFORMANCE

		PERFORMANCE						7 Water used (L 'normal' wash)
Brand / model (in rank order within groups)	1 Type	2 Overall score (%)	3 Dirt removal score (%)	4 Gentleness score (%)	5 Spin efficiency score (%)	6 Energy efficiency score (%)	7 Water efficiency score (%)	
UP TO 5.5 KG								
MIELE Novotronic W 828	Front	80	80	76	81	89	76	61
ELECTROLUX Inclined Axis EW 1055 F	Front	76	77	70	74	83	75	68
SIMPSON Esprit 455551D	Front	75	72	73	77	84	73	73
WHIRLPOOL AWM 5100	Front	75	70	74	74	83	79	57
ARISTON Margherita 2000 AB95 (A)	Front	74	70	82	73	83	69	87
FISHER & PAYKEL Pride MW511	Top / agitator	65	69	47	78	73	54	127
HOOVER 500MD (B)	Top / agitator	65	75	46	71	64	53	118
# SIMPSON Eziset 550 365550L	Top / agitator	65	65	41	72	72	72	77
FISHER & PAYKEL Excellence GW512 (C)	Top / agitator	64	62	60	77	70	52	133
SAMSUNG Triflow SW55APP2	Top / impeller	61	78	58	65	33	40	164
NEC NW-452	Top / impeller	56	60	58	56	62	36	145
6 KG TO 7 KG								
# MIELE Novotronic W 1986	Front	79	79	69	78	87	81	63
AEG Lavamat W 1050 Electronic	Front	77	71	76	82	90	76	71
ARISTON Margherita 2000 AL129X (A)	Front	77	79	70	79	82	72	84
WHIRLPOOL 6th Sense AWM 8121	Front	77	74	69	85	82	83	60
ASKO Quattro W6231	Front	76	70	74	80	86	78	65
BOSCH Maxx 1000 WFO 2060	Front	76	71	70	75	90	81	62
WESTINGHOUSE Mastermind LF711C	Front	76	72	70	78	91	73	95
# ASKO Quattro W6021	Front	75	70	68	80	87	81	57
# BOSCH Maxx 1000 WFL 2000	Front	74	69	70	73	90	76	77
ARISTON AXD120 (A)	Front	73	65	75	80	85	76	84
BOSCH Maxx 800 WFL 1660	Front	73	68	71	66	91	77	74
# MAYTAG MAF 1300 AAW	Front	72	59	72	79	87	85	51
WESTINGHOUSE LT609S Complete Care	Top / agitator	70	78	50	71	68	71	86
FISHER & PAYKEL Excellence GW612 (C)	Top / agitator	68	75	50	81	71	53	154
FISHER & PAYKEL Intuitive Eco IW712 (C)	Top / agitator	68	72	42	77	85	58	149
HOOVER 600MD (B)	Top / agitator	68	78	44	65	74	60	120
# SIMPSON Eziset 605 365605L	Top / agitator	65	65	45	71	74	72	85
SAMSUNG Triflow SW65ASP	Top / impeller	63	73	54	58	62	53	153
7.5 KG OR LARGER								
# LG WD-1019BD	Front	76	76	68	73	89	77	113
FISHER & PAYKEL Intuitive Eco IW812 (C)	Top / agitator	72	74	54	84	86	56	177
WESTINGHOUSE LT955S Complete Care	Top / agitator	69	71	60	75	68	70	141
FISHER & PAYKEL Excellence GW712 (C)	Top / agitator	68	69	54	86	72	55	168
SAMSUNG Triflow SW95ASP	Top / impeller	68	75	60	61	73	59	192
# SIMPSON Eziset 800 225800L	Top / agitator	68	71	42	79	71	71	114
# SIMPSON Eziset 805 225805L	Top / agitator	68	71	42	79	71	71	114
WESTINGHOUSE LT809S Complete Care	Top / agitator	68	64	58	77	73	72	110
HITACHI SF-H800PX	Top / impeller	67	74	52	79	62	55	180
HOOVER 750LD (B)	Top / agitator	63	70	46	68	68	49	189
HOOVER 800RLD (B)	Top / agitator	63	65	50	72	69	53	186
KLEENMAID LWK24AW-3050	Top / agitator	57	56	65	51	64	52	167
KLEENMAID LWK74AW-3050	Top / agitator	57	56	65	51	64	52	167
# MAYTAG Performa PAV 3300 AGW	Top / agitator	56	46	48	69	65	68	130

See page 43 for footnotes and table notes.

9 FEATURES								SPECIFICATIONS					COSTS	
Delay start (hours)	Out-of-balance correction	Anti-crease	Selectable spin speed	Load sensor	Extra rinse	Water-saver option	Cold-only connection possible*	Capacity (kg)	Dimensions (H x W x D, cm)**	Warranty (years)†	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	10 Running costs (\$ / 10 years)	Price (\$):‡
1-24	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	5	85 x 60 x 64	2	Germany	Miele	417	1799
	✓	✓	✓	ns	✓		✓	5.5	85 x 60 x 62	2	Italy	Electrolux	600	1099
Up to 9	✓	✓	✓			✓	ns	5.5	85 x 60 x 57	2	Italy	Electrolux	589	849
	✓	✓	✓				✓	5.5	85 x 60 x 58	2	Italy	Whirlpool	557	782
	✓	✓				✓	✓	5.5	84 x 60 x 54	5	Italy	Ariston	649	1099
	✓		✓		✓		✓	5.5	101 x 56 x 59	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	1022	599
1, 3, 9		✓		ns		✓	✓	5	99 x 58 x 61	2	Australia	Electrolux	1090	649
	✓						✓	5.5	101 x 58 x 63	2	Australia	Electrolux	836	699
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ (F)	✓	5.5	102 x 56 x 58	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	1100	699
	ns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5.5	101 x 60 x 66	2	Korea	Samsung	1978	599
2-48	✓			✓			✓	4.5	85 x 53 x 61	2	Korea	NEC	1176	529
0.5-24	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓ (G)	6.5	85 x 60 x 72	2	Germany	Miele	539	2999
	ns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	85 x 60 x 60	3	Germany	Andi Co	476	1559
1, 3, 9, 12	ns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	85 x 60 x 54	2	Italy	Ariston	708	1599
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	86 x 60 x 60	2	Italy	Whirlpool	674	968
Up to 5	✓	✓	✓	✓	(E)	✓	✓	6	85 x 60 x 59	2	Sweden	Asko	539	1849
Up to 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6.5	86 x 60 x 59	2	Thailand	Bosch	470	1499
3-19 (D)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	85 x 60 x 65	2	Korea	Electrolux	634	1199
	✓	✓	✓	✓	(E)	✓	✓	6	85 x 60 x 59	2	Sweden	Asko	490	1699
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6.5	86 x 60 x 59	2	Thailand	Bosch	526	1099
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	85 x 60 x 54	2	Italy	Ariston	696	1799
1-24	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6.5	86 x 60 x 59	2	Thailand	Bosch	478	949
Up to 24	✓	✓	✓	ns	✓		ns	7	85 x 60 x 60	ns	UK	Maytag	531	1399
1-23	ns	✓	✓			✓	✓	6	103 x 58 x 63	2	Australia	Electrolux	1009	799
1, 3, 9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ (F)	✓	6.5	102 x 60 x 62	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	1259	799
0.25-18	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	101 x 60 x 63	2	Australia	Fisher & Paykel	944	999
		✓					✓	6	100 x 58 x 64	2	Australia	Electrolux	1002	749
		✓		ns		✓	✓	6	101 x 58 x 63	2	Australia	Electrolux	889	779
	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	6.5	101 x 69 x 71	1	Korea	Samsung	1498	699
3 to 19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	ns	ns	10	109 x 69 x 75	3	Korea	LG	826	1999
0.25-18	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	100 x 65 x 65	2	NZ	Fisher & Paykel	1080	1099
1-23	ns	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9.5	107 x 68 x 73	2	Australia	Electrolux	1622	1199
1, 3, 9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ (F)	✓	7.5	100 x 65 x 65	2	NZ	Fisher & Paykel	1405	889
1-18	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	9.5	106 x 66 x 76	2	Korea	Samsung	1669	1499
		✓		ns		✓	✓	8	107 x 68 x 73	2	Australia	Electrolux	1261	949
		✓		ns		✓ (F)	✓	8	107 x 68 x 73	2	Australia	Electrolux	1261	1049
	1-23	ns	✓	✓		✓	✓	8	107 x 68 x 73	2	Australia	Electrolux	1182	999
3-12	✓	✓		✓			✓	8	95 x 63 x 68	2	Japan	Hitachi	1779	999
	✓	✓				✓	✓	7.5	104 x 68 x 72	2	Australia	Electrolux	1569	899
	✓	✓					✓	8	105 x 68 x 72	2	Australia	Electrolux	1606	999
	✓	✓					✓	7.5	109 x 65 x 71	5	USA	Kleenmaid	1521	2199
	✓	✓					✓	7.5	109 x 65 x 71	5	USA	Kleenmaid	1521	2299
	✓	✓	✓	ns			ns	8	112 x 69 x 69	ns	USA	Maytag	1483	1199

Looking at the STARS

Shopping for a large electrical appliance? Your choice can influence your energy bill for 10 years or more, so check the energy label.

The electricity costs of running a large appliance can, over its lifetime, add up to more than it cost you to purchase it. So choosing an energy-efficient model will save you money. And because most electricity generation produces greenhouse gases, it's better for the environment too.

Our tests often show that energy-efficient models don't have to be more expensive to buy than those with higher energy consumption. But even if you do pay a bit more upfront for a model with more stars, its lower running costs may more than make up for it.

Comparing the energy efficiency of large electrical appliances is easy in Australia. Air conditioners, clothes dryers, dishwashers, freezers, fridges and washing machines must carry an energy rating label, which allows you to quickly compare the efficiency of different models.

The labelling scheme is run by state, territory and federal governments, and the test procedures used are based on Australian standards.

HOW TO USE THE ENERGY LABEL

The label gives you two bits of information:

- **A star rating** from one to six stars that tells you how **efficient** the model is — the more stars the better.
- **The actual electricity consumption** (in kilowatt hours; kWh) of the model per hour or per year, depending on the appliance. The yearly consumption is an estimate based on a particular usage pattern (for example, washing machines are assumed to run seven times a week on a certain program).

The star rating takes into account the size of an appliance — for example, it's based on the electricity consumption per kilo of washing, or per place setting for dishwashers. Often it's easier for a larger model to be more efficient (and therefore have more stars) than a smaller one. However, since it's bigger, its overall energy consumption is often higher than the smaller model.

So it's important you think about the right size

for your needs first, and then compare the star ratings of models within that size.

For example, if a 350 L fridge is what you need, there's not much point getting a 500 L model just because it has more stars, because it may still use more electricity and cost you more to run.

WHAT THE LABEL ISN'T

- It doesn't give a guarantee of a model's reliability, safety or durability.
- It's not a seal of efficiency — all the models in the product types covered by the label have to carry one, even if they only rate half a star.
- It doesn't tell you exactly how much energy the model will use in your household — the figures are comparative, based on specific usage scenarios.

NEW LABEL

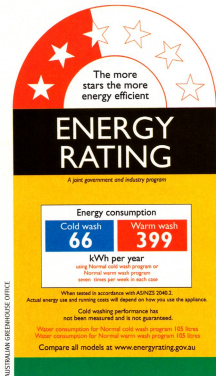
A new label was launched in March 2004 to complement the star rating label. It's called TESAW (Top Energy Saver Award) and is a joint government and industry initiative. The label is awarded to the most energy-efficient models in their product type in a specific year, and the criteria are reviewed each year.

WHAT'S MEPS?

MEPS stands for Minimum Energy Performance Standard. If a product is covered by a MEPS, all models sold in Australia are required to meet the minimum energy efficiency criteria defined by the standard. So a MEPS gives a kind of baseline energy use from which all models have to start, while the energy label tells you which go further than that, by having more stars.

MEPS for electric storage water heaters, fridges and freezers have been in place for several years, and one for air conditioners is being introduced. The MEPS for fridges and freezers was recently reviewed and all products made or imported after January 1, 2005, will have to comply with the revised higher MEPS. The improvement in energy efficiency means you'll mostly be seeing four stars or more on fridge and freezer labels until the star rating is revised too.

More information on the energy label and MEPS is available at www.energyrating.gov.au.



IN A NUTSHELL

- The energy rating label makes it easy to compare the efficiency of different models.
- Work out what size of appliance meets your needs, then compare the star ratings for models within that size.

www.choice.com.au
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 Australian Consumers' Association

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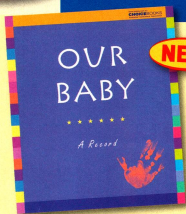
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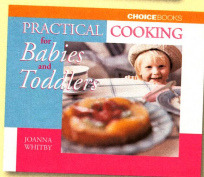
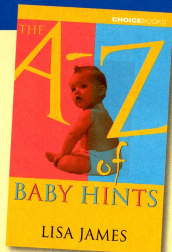
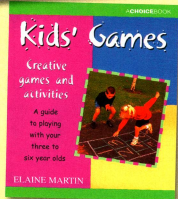
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NEW



recalls&bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Federal Treasury website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Consumer Safety Unit on (02) 6263 2747.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

INFANT FORMULA: Nestlé has recalled **Nestlé Nan 1 Probiotic Starter Infant Formula with Bifidus**, sold in a 900 g can, lot code AUEUCT, marked 'use by 05 Aug 2005' on the bottom of the can. **The problem:** An incorrect formulation mix occurred during the manufacturing process, resulting in some product not meeting food standards regulations. The affected product may cause babies to become unsettled. It may also cause constipation and/or diarrhoea. **What to do:** Don't feed it to your baby. Return the can, even if already opened, to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call 1800 069 678.

FOOD: General Mills has recalled **Latina Creamy Tomato and Roasted Mushroom Pasta Sauce**, use-by date 09/07/04, in a 325 g clear plastic tub. **The problem:** It may incorrectly contain another variety of sauce, Latina Cherry Tomato, Pinenut and Parmesan, resulting in pinenuts not being declared on the label. Pinenuts can cause allergic reactions in susceptible people. **What to do:** If you have a pinenut allergy or intolerance and froze this product for later use, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call 1800 800 424 for more information.

FOOD: All About Bread has recalled **Amazing Cake Mix**, in a 500 g propylene plastic bag, all best-before dates prior to 18/09/04, distributed in WA. **The problem:** It contains undeclared powdered egg and dairy protein. **What to do:** If you suffer from an egg or dairy protein allergy or intolerance, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. Call (08) 9343 4430 for more information.

FOOD: Confectionery Trading Company has recalled **IGA Fabulously Fun Lolly Pops**, in a 200 g plastic bag, best before Feb 2005, sold in NSW and ACT IGA stores. **The problem:** Some lollipops contain undeclared egg and dairy protein. **What to do:** If you suffer from an egg or dairy protein allergy or intolerance, don't eat it. Return it to the place

of purchase for a refund. For more information call (02) 9684 4677.

FOOD: Koz Worldwide Imports has recalled **Ttangkong Kangjung** (peanut snack), in a 72 g plastic bag, expiry date 2004.08.03, imported from Korea and distributed in Brisbane metro and Gold Coast, Queensland. **The problem:** It's a peanut-based product, but peanuts don't appear in the English-language ingredient list. **What to do:** If you suffer from a peanut protein allergy or intolerance, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund. For more information call (07) 3274 1700.

FOOD: Woolworths has recalled the following products, sold in various sizes from the deli department of Woolworths Port Augusta store: **tomato semi-dried, tomato stuffed, dried marinated, vine leaves stuffed, Siena artipasto chargilled, tomato semi-dried 97% fat free, artichoke Italian-style.** The recall applies to those products purchased/packed on or before July 14, 2004. **The problem:** They may contain glass. **What to do:** If you froze any of these products for later use, or still have unused portions, don't eat them. Return them to your nearest Woolworths supermarket for a refund. Call 1800 638 434 for more information.

FOOD: Woolworths has recalled **Safeway regular beef mince**, use-by 02/07/04, packed on 30/06/04, in a polystyrene tray wrapped with clear plastic, random weights, sold from Safeway in Croydon, Victoria. **The problem:** Due to machinery failure it may contain metal filings. **What to do:** If you froze it for later use, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY: Hunter Leisure has recalled **Buzz Lightyear Laser Disc Launcher**, sold in the Buzz Lightyear showbag at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, the Campbelltown Show and the Hawkesbury Show during April 2004. It consists of a red, yellow, green or blue toy gun, with a plastic chamber

containing multicoloured foam discs. A 'Buzz' sticker near the disc chamber identifies the toy. **The problem:** The foam discs are an inhalation/choking hazard. **What to do:** Immediately remove the toy from children's reach. Return it by reply-paid post, including your return address on the package, to Laser Disc Launcher, Reply Paid 79849, Tullamarine 3043. It will be replaced with an item of similar value. For more information call (03) 9287 9888.

TOY: Toys "R" Us has recalled **Dream Dazzlers ride-on toy**, model number 3-50103D, with a manufacture code from 20021127 to 20030319 located inside the battery compartment on the top panel next to the steering wheel, sold between March 2003 and April 2004. **The problem:** The screw and nut assembly attaching the steering wheel may come loose and pose a choking hazard to young children. **What to do:** Stop children using it. Return it to your nearest Toys "R" Us store, where it will be checked and fitted with a new safety assembly.

TOY: Gag Magic Showbags South has recalled the **Saxophone Xylophone**, item number FD-025, included in the Bag of Music showbag sold at the 2004 Sydney Royal Easter Show. **The problem:** It has removable legs or pegs that pose a choking hazard for small children. **What to do:** Stop children using it. Call (03) 9481 6488 (reverse charges accepted) from 10 am to 3 pm weekdays to arrange for its return and a replacement or refund.

TOY: Avon Products has recalled **Lotsa Legs Activity Toy**, a stylised octopus with purple body and eight different-coloured and patterned legs that featured in Avon's Campaign 10 brochure (commencement date 5/4/04). Each leg contains a source of activity, such as different sound effects. **The problem:** The activity piece in the leg is contained within the stitching, which may come undone, posing a choking/inhalation hazard for children.

What to do: Stop children using it. Avon representatives will be contacting consumers, offering a refund and collecting it for return to Avon. For more information call (02) 9936 7555.

TOY: The Discount Variety Group has recalled **Plush Hanging Monkey Supersoft Toy**, product code 3617376, barcode 9316292139344, sold since May 2003 through Crazy Clark's and Makro Warehouse in WA. **The problem:** Its tail wire could create a potentially dangerous sharp point. **What to do:** Stop children using it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call (07) 3860 9635 for more information.

COT: Boori International has recalled **Boori Paddington 3-in-1 cot**, a timber cot that converts to a junior bed and seat. **The problem:** You can assemble it incorrectly by positioning the mattress base at the highest screw holes, which are intended for the bed rails. **What to do:** Call 1800 036 254 during business hours, Monday to Friday, to arrange for free onsite modification.

DISHWASHER: Fisher & Paykel has recalled **DishDrawer dishwashers**, models DD603, DD6031, DS603 and DS6031, serial numbers starting with 'C' and 'U', manufactured between January 2001 and December 2002, largely sold prior to June 2003. **The problem:** Contaminants such as insects can enter and affect the electronic control system, causing product failures and water or smoke damage. **What to do:** A device has been developed to protect these appliances. If you haven't yet been contacted by Fisher & Paykel regarding its installation, call 1800 005 033 for more information.

ELECTRIC BLANKET: Breville has recalled **Dreamland by Breville Electric Blankets**, model numbers UL1, UL5, PP1 and PP5 with temperature controller model EC20, sold between 1997 and 2000. The model number is located on the material tag attached to the blanket, and the temperature controller model number is on the back of the controller. **The problem:** The flexible cord connecting the blanket and temperature controller may fuse, causing scorching of bed linen. **What to do:** Stop using it. Call 1300 727 424 weekdays between 8.30 am and 5 pm EST for more information.

aboutchoice

The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance their quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

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HOW TO USE THIS INDEX

Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.

* Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts and other small pieces.

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49⁵⁰
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But not your wallet.

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Plastic Renew KIT

- Motorcycle and ATV plastic restoring kit
- Gives your bike that showroom shine
- Restores at least four complete bikes or two ATV's
- Works on any plastic

"...your toolbox should have a bottle of plastic Renew in it. It works."

MOTORCROSS



AFTER
\$39.95
BEFORE

SOMEONE'S DROPPED THEIR GUARD

Twelve-year-old Timothy Bell found a couple of clangers in this Plastic Renew ad. First, he assures us the 'before' mudguard is a rear one, while the 'after' is a front mudguard — which hardly qualifies as a genuine 'before' and 'after' sequence. Second, he reckons he'd rather have the 'before' mudguard ...

8FA 135

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION

SERVINGS PER PACK: 24
 SERVING SIZE: 2g

	AVE QTY PER SERVING	AVE QTY PER 100g
ENERGY	96kJ	1850kJ
PROTEIN	less than 1g	2.7g
FAT, total	less than 1g	16.5g
—saturated	less than 1g	15.7g
CARBOHYDRATE, total	3.6g	69.0g
—sugars	3.3g	63.2g
SODIUM	6mg	116mg

ESKIMO Bites
 VANILLA/COCONUT



Get out your scalpel and ruler

There are about 16 Eskimo Bites in a packet but 24 servings ... that makes two thirds of a Bite per serve.

SUNDAY ONLY SPECIAL **Whole Steer Scotch Fillets \$11.99 kg**

SUNDAY ONLY SPECIAL EFFECTIVE 20/6/2004 to 26/6/2004

Elipos available Monday-Friday 6.00 am-5.00 pm
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TASMAN MEATS



Manchester Road Fish & Chip Shop

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 (Closed Tuesday)

Local gummy flake, chips and potato



... and Tuesday's not an everyday day

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The winner of this month's book prize for best entry goes to T Bell. Thanks to T Bell, A Casey, J Langley, T Ritchie, J Gibson and V Jones for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep them coming.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

~~When filling the bottle, do not use boiling water and~~ only fill to a maximum of two-thirds capacity. Fill the bottle slowly in an upright position, holding it by the neck to prevent hot water splashing back. Expel air from bottle by lowering it carefully on a flat surface until water appears at the opening. Screw the stopper sufficiently tight to ensure that there is no leakage. In practice, finger tight should be adequate.

~~Do not fill using water from a domestic hot water system as~~ this can permanently degrade the product.

• Do not let the bottle come into contact with hot surfaces

COLD-WATER BOTTLE?

Reader Anni Casey's in a quandary about what kind of hot water she can actually put in this hot-water bottle ...

